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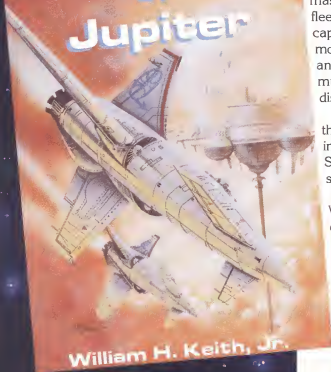
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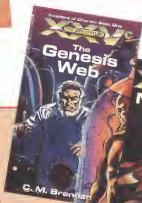
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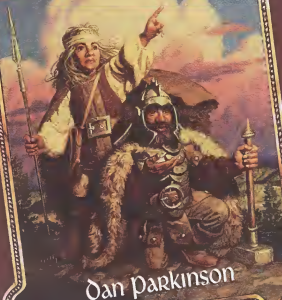


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Contents



9

SOMETIMES I'M TOO ACCESSIBLE

- 4** Kim Mohan

REFLECTIONS

- 5** Robert Silverberg

FICTION

- 9** The Knot by Elisabeth Vonarburg
- 14** Dover Beach by Tony Daniel
- 23** Grace and Percy by Juleen Brantingham
- 32** A Little Waltz Music by Arlan Andrews, Sr.
- 41** Old Soldiers Never Die by Barry B. Longyear
- 44** A History of the Antipodes by Phillip C. Jennings
- 74** Men of Good Will by J. R. Dunn



14



32



74



23



44

NONFICTION

- 31** About the Authors
- 56** Worldbuilding 101 by Stephen L. Gillett
- 59** To the Moon With Mr. V by Gregory Benford
- 63** Tomorrow's Books compiled by Susan C. Stone and Bill Fawcett
- 94** Back Issues and Anthologies

LOOKING FORWARD

- 66** Athyra by Steven Brust
- 71** The Devil You Say by Elisa DeCarlo

Cartoons by George Trosley (page 8)
Scott Arthur Masear (page 22)



Cover Art by Frank Kelly Freas

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Sometimes I'm Too Accessible

Kim Mohan

Soon after I took this job, a writer of no small reputation made the remark to me during a phone conversation that he had been surprised to discover that I answered my own phone.

"Well, gosh," I said, in my usual glib way. "It's no big thing, I guess. I've never thought about the idea of anyone else answering my phone for me."

So, from Day One, that's the way it has been. Your call comes into the giant TSR switchboard; then, if you ask for me by name or by title, the next voice you hear is mine. Nine times out of ten, the system (such as it is) works just fine; the person who called really did need to talk to me, and it's good that he or she didn't have to go through some kind of screening process.

One time out of ten, though, I wish there was a screen, a barbed wire fence, six-inch armor plating—*something* that could insulate me from the loonies who occasionally penetrate our lack of security. They don't *need* to talk to me, and vice versa. But once I have one on the phone, I figure the politest and easiest thing to do is let 'em talk, answer 'em nicely, and hope they hang up soon (because, after all, they are paying for the call). A typical conversation goes something like this:

—Is this AMAZING Stories? "Yes, it is. What can I do for you?" [What I want to say—but don't, of course, is, "Yeah, yeah. Are you surprised? Apparently you did manage to punch

in the right number. Or did someone else dial for you?"]

—Do you take stories from people?

"Sure we do." ["That is, assuming I understand what you're really asking. We don't *take* stories, actually, because that would be illegal; we pay money for them. And in all the time I've had this job, we've never bought a story from anyone who wasn't a person. Maybe this will be our first time."]

—Okay, well, I have this story I finished and I showed it to my friends and they all said it's good and they told me I should try and get it published. "That's nice." ["Do any of your friends happen to be professional editors? Are any of them able to dress themselves?"]

—Is it all right if I tell you a little bit about it to see if you like it? "Sure, go ahead." ["I can't imagine anything I have to do that would be more important or more interesting than hearing about your story. But, if I miss my next deadline, is it okay for me to tell my boss that it was all your fault?"]

—Well, there's this mysterious stranger that comes into this town, and nobody knows anything about him ["I'll bet that's what makes him mysterious, huh?"] and then people start disappearing from the town and the other people finally figure out that the stranger has something to do with it. "Hmmm." ["Sounds to me like a laboratory rat would have a higher IQ than all the people in this town put together. Are you sure

we wouldn't be better off if they all disappeared?"]

—Then this little girl goes out to spy on the stranger and she sees him using a disintegrator on somebody and she figures out he's an alien that wants to take over the town. And it goes on from there. ["I'll just bet it does."] Does that sound like something you might want to publish? "Well, you never know." ["If we ever decide to change the content of the magazine and print only poorly written stories based on ideas that went out of style shortly after Prohibition was repealed, this one sounds like something that would fit right in."]

—I could send it to you, if you promise not to steal the idea. "Oh, don't worry about that." [Which says it all.]

—If you buy it, how soon would you print it and how much would I get paid? "Well, that all depends. These things are hard to predict sometimes." ["If someone came into our offices with a disintegrator and zapped all our stories except yours, and if nobody else in the world sent us a story for a whole month, then we would publish your story pretty quickly. And we'd pay you what we thought it was worth, which probably wouldn't be enough for a down payment on a pair of socks."]

—Well then, I guess that's what I'll do. Thanks a lot. Bye. "Okay. Thanks for calling." ["Wait a minute. You'll do what? Why am I bothering to ask that? Why do I even care? Where's the aspin?"] ♦

Reflections

Robert Silverberg

The critic John Clute, in his introduction to the wonderful collection of stories by "James Tiptree, Jr." that Arkham House published in 1990 under the title of *Her Smoke Rose Up Forever* and which you should certainly buy immediately and read, because Tiptree was one of the great masters of modern science fiction, has this to say about a certain much-discussed introduction to a previous Tiptree collection that I wrote nearly two decades earlier:

"In 1975, in his introduction to Tiptree's *Warm Worlds and Otherwise*, Robert Silverberg gave voice to a biocritical speculation about the author which has since become famous. 'It has been suggested that Tiptree is female,' he wrote, 'a theory that I find absurd, for there is to me something ineluctably masculine about Tiptree's writing.' Given human nature, it's unlikely many of Silverberg's readers could have failed to enjoy the discomfiture he must have felt in 1977 when Tiptree's identity was uncovered, and there is no denying that what he said was both inappropriate in its self-assurance and culture-bound in its assumption that an artifact of language . . . was inherently sexed, so that only a biological male could utter it. This was surely careless of Silverberg."

What this is all about, for those who come in late, is the revelation in 1976 that the mysterious person who for the previous eight or nine years had been writing superb science fiction under the name of "James Tiptree, Jr."—and whose easy familiarity with

such "masculine" matters as guns, airplanes, the interior workings of automobile engines, and the military/espionage world seemed to indicate that he was, as I put it in my celebrated introduction, "a man of 50 or 55, possibly unmarried, fond of outdoor life, restless in his everyday existence, a man who has seen much of the world and understands it well"—was, in fact, a 61-year-old retired psychologist named Alice B. Sheldon, very much female.

Well, I certainly looked silly, didn't I! But—contrary to my good friend John Clute's assertion—I felt very little 'discomfiture,' only surprise, and some degree of intellectual excitement. For what the Tiptree affair had done was to bring into focus the whole issue of whether such things as "masculine" and "feminine" fiction existed. This is what I had to say in an unabashed afterword to my Tiptree introduction when *Warm Worlds and Otherwise* was reissued four years after Alice Sheldon had confessed to being the author of those "ineluctably masculine" Tiptree stories:

"Just before Christmas, 1976, came a letter in the familiar blue-ribbon typing, hesitantly confessing that 'Tiptree' is the pseudonym of Dr. Alice B. Sheldon, and hoping I would not be too upset about having gone so far out on a limb with my insistence on 'Tiptree's' maleness. Quite a surprise package. . . .

"Okay: no shame attaches. She fooled me beautifully, along with everyone else, and called into question the entire notion of what is

'masculine' or 'feminine' in fiction. I am still wrestling with that. What I have learned is that there are some women who can write about traditionally male topics more knowledgeably than most men, and that the truly superior artist can adopt whatever tone is appropriate to the material and bring it off. And I have learned—again; as if I needed one more lesson in it—that Things Are Seldom What They Seem. For these aspects of my education, Alli Sheldon, I thank you. And for much else."

I never met the woman who wrote the Tiptree stories, though as the editor of the *New Dimensions* series and other projects of the 1970's I published a number of her finest stories. We corresponded, on and off, for about fifteen years. Since "James" is a male name and the Tiptree stories were not only crisp, tough, conventionally "male" in voice but also indicated a much deeper knowledge of machinery and politics and the military world than many unquestionably male writers (Robert Silverberg, for instance) have, I had no reason to think that this reclusive, much-traveled, knowledgeable Tiptree person was anything but what "he" seemed to be.

Alli Sheldon herself, be it noted, *never* in any way claimed to be a man to any of her many correspondents. She simply never said she wasn't, and left us to draw our own conclusions. And occasionally dropped in an artful half-truth to keep us bamboozled.

For example, in a letter to me of June 8, 1974, she noted that I had

written my last letter to her on the back of a piece of my wife's stationery, and so, she said, "I read the first part of your letter under the impression I was hearing from her. In fact, I shaved and applied lotion before continuing."

Very tricky. Men, of course, are not the only members of the human species who shave; but shaving is, nevertheless, an act that is more commonly associated with men than with women, perhaps because the part of the body that men customarily shave is more visible than the parts women shave.

But notice also that Tiptree talks about feeling that it would be appropriate *to shave and apply lotion* before continuing to read a letter that seemed to come from my wife, which could easily be construed as a macho male's amiable way of saying that he would want to look his best in the presence of such an attractive woman as he understood my wife to be. (In the same paragraph, though, "Tiptree" provided, if I had only had the wit to see it, a huge hint in the other direction. My wife in 1974 was not the Karen of modern times but Barbara, an electronics engineer with a training in physics, very much the prototype of the liberated woman; and Tiptree, citing Barbara's reputation as a formidable scientist who also happened to be female, said, "She is, if you want to know, one of my chief inducements to forsake anonymity, the other being U. K. Le Guin." I was free to interpret that as meaning that if Tiptree came out of hiding he would have the chance to meet those two remarkable women—something a man might very well want to do; but in hindsight it also appears to be saying that the success of those two women in attaining intellectual achievement and public acclaim despite the handicap of belonging to the "second sex" was almost inspiring enough for the author of the Tiptree stories to admit that she, too, was a woman.

I assume that Alli Sheldon felt she would somehow be at a disadvantage if she submitted her stories with a female byline. In fact she was wrong about that: such women as Kate Wilhelm, Joanna Russ, Ursula Le Guin,

Anne McCaffrey, and Marion Zimmer Bradley were already quite prominent in sf when the first Tiptree stories began to appear. But also, I think, the masquerade in false whiskers was a kind of stimulating game to her, a facet of her complex, quirky personality. And certainly she carried it off brilliantly.

Eventually a Baltimore fan named Jeffrey D. Smith, through clever sleuthing, uncovered the Sheldon identity behind the Tiptree stories. In December 1976, she admitted the truth to a small group of people like me whom she felt she might have offended by allowing them to persist in their error. "Honour, or something, compels me to do something after which I fear I may have lost a deeply valued friend," she wrote me, and confessed the truth about herself, saying, "It hasn't been a put-on or attempt to take advantage, it just grew and grew until 'Tip' became me." And when I replied that I was more amused than angered, she wrote back to say, "Thank God. Jesus with what trepidation I opened your letter. . . . When I saw how thick it was I thought, Here it goes. 2 pages of telling me what a shit I am; all gone forever."

I suppose I *could* have been annoyed. She had seen my infamous introduction proving that she was male before it was published, and let it appear in print. Her comment to me on it after reading the manuscript was, "Just read your intro for that Ballantine thing. Jesus god, man. I won't go on about looking over my shoulder to see who in hell he's *talking* about. . . . The organization and clarity of the thing is a bit boggling. It conveys the picture of a mind so lucidly, effortlessly informed that on request it turns out indifferently a flawless essay on the lepidoptera of Mindanao or the political theories of Apollinaris Sidonius." Not a hint from Tiptree there that my lucid and well-informed mind was completely in error about the writer I was discussing.

After all this time, one basic issue remains: Was Alice Sheldon/James Tiptree a writer who was so well informed about traditional man-stuff like guns and armies and machinery that she crossed the boundary that

separates men's fiction from women's fiction, or is that boundary in fact nonexistent? As you form your own opinion, bear in mind that we are talking about a woman who was born in 1915, and that even in the world of the 1970's, not all that long ago, men were the ones who did most of the rough, tough things that Alli Sheldon wrote about with such apparent expertise. The lines have blurred since then; the stereotypes have begun to break down.

I *still* think that Ernest Hemingway wrote like a man and Jane Austen like a woman, and that there are discernible differences both in style and in content. (Don't tell me about the yearnings toward androgyny that have surfaced in Hemingway's posthumously published work: he still sounds like a man to me.) So, the Tiptree episode notwithstanding, I suppose I still haven't fully learned my lesson.

In the very collection that I prefaced was the powerful feminist story "The Women Men Don't See." The title tells it all. I chose to interpret it as the work of a man with great insight into the difficulties women face in our culture. Stupid of me, in retrospect. I let myself be snookered by the first-person-male narration and forgot to listen to what was really being said.

Or consider, if you will, Tiptree's classic "Houston, Houston, Do You Read?" which was published after I wrote my introduction, and won all the awards in sight. It's a superb story. The male sex has become extinct and the women are doing just fine by parthenogenesis, and then three men out of the past turn up out of a time-warped. They act like boobs, generally. They can't help it, poor things: they're men, after all. And the cool, competent women of that future world know what to do with them. I like to believe that if I had been able to read that cruel, magnificent story before I had written that 1975 piece on Tiptree, I would have thought twice about proclaiming the "ineluctable masculinity" of its author. Maybe a man *could* have written "Houston, Houston." But certainly I don't think so. Am I in trouble all over again? ♦

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Letters

Dear Mr. Mohan:

Here are my suggestions for AMAZING Stories.

First of all: Is the magazine receiving a lot of money for that advertising supplement called "Looking Forward"? I would much prefer an extra two or three short stories. However, if the advertising income supports the rest of the magazine, you have my permission to continue to accept it.

Second: I prefer cartoons to poetry as filler. You could even print jokes, like *Reader's Digest* does.

Third: If you can't come up with an interesting editorial, please put in another short story. (An editorial about SASEs? Another replying to idiot replies to rejection letters? I understand that they are annoying, but I have a hard time believing you can't come up with better topics.)

Fourth: Women writers are under-represented in your magazine. Many of the most amazing stories are written by women these days. Somehow, your magazine doesn't have its fair share. What are you doing wrong? Are most of your submissions from subscribers? If TSR has tried to draw subscribers mostly from users of other TSR products, that might explain it.)

Fifth: I like the science column. Stephen Gillett is funny.

Sixth: The clean graphic look is not important to me. I preferred the digest size. Recycled paper would be nice. The stories are important. Everything else is secondary.

Seventh: The stories are pretty good. I won't give you a story by story rating. This will probably be the only letter I ever write you, and I find those letters boring.

Vicki Wagner
Oakland CA

Dear Kim:

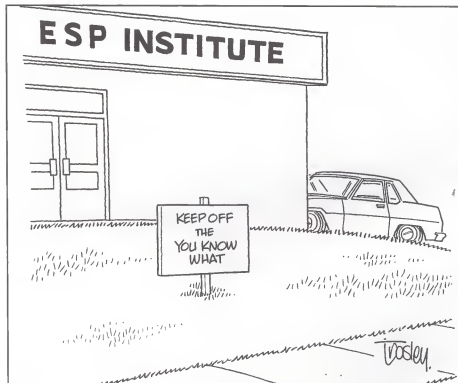
I just succeeded in freeing the January issue from its protective armor and was favorably impressed by the first three things I read, your "editorial," Silverberg's short history of pseudonyms and Gillett's article on thalassogens.

What has caught my attention with every issue I've received, however, has been the large-size format and the cover art.

These things strike a strongly nostalgic note with me. The first true science fiction story I ever read (i.e., not counting Edgar Rice Burroughs, etc.) was in an issue of *Amazing Stories* about 1929.

At the time I was visiting my mother in Virginia and she took me into Washington for a day. We were at Union Station and on a newsstand I saw this magnificent big magazine with a fantastic picture of the sun blacked out on its cover. I wheedled my mother into buying it for me, and the story the cover illustrated was the first installment of Jack Williamson's *The Green Girl*. From that point on I was a devoted reader of the science fiction magazines of the day.

Charles L. Fontenay
St. Petersburg FL



ELISABETH VONARBURG

THE KNOT



Illustration by
Dell Harris

They say nothing to you, at the Center. They open the door for you, they give you drink, food: it's been a long journey. You're taken to a room: white walls, a narrow bed, and a window you go to at once, drawn to the dizzying deep blue of the sky, where night is falling. The door closes again, and you turn around: they haven't said anything to you, and you've only just realized it.

The next morning (you always arrive at night; it takes everyone a whole day to climb up from the last way station), you wake early. Not a sound. The walls, the ceilings are mute. No steps reverberate in the corridors. You do know, however, that there are people around you. The Center's inhabitants are many, as are the aspiring Voyagers. Suddenly you think of the Voyagers: perhaps some of them have returned during the night, or a short while ago. You realize, then, that you are at the Center, THE CENTER, and a kind of dizziness makes you close your eyes, clutch the edges of the bed; it seems you're falling right through the stone floor, sucked down by a great void: the underground hall that houses the gate to other universes.

They didn't say anything the next morning. Sounds of voices and smells of food guided me to the dining hall at breakfast time. An arm raised as I entered directed me to the only face I knew, that of a tall black man with white hair but unlined skin, and merry wrinkles at the corners of the eyes: the one who'd opened the door for me, the day before. Have you slept well? Tea or coffee? Nothing more. And of course, they don't really need to talk. You're there, you've come from any one of the continents, you've had enough strength, obstinacy or just plain luck to get to the end of the road. It's enough of a definition, to start with.

Then you talk, you ask questions. And thus they learn everything they want to know about you. (And if you don't talk? But you always do: they can remain silent for a very long time.)

I first asked: "When?" and Tieheart, the black man, shook his head: "It will depend on you."

I did not say, "Why?" He knew then that I was aware of the necessary steps in preparing for the Voyage. One leaves when one is ready. The body, at least, should be ready. The mind . . . One prepares it as much as one can, and that's not much.

I asked: "When do we begin?"

He smiled without answering: it had begun already.

When I went on my first Voyage, I woke up in light. I could feel it through my closed eyelids, a cruel, sharp light. I forced myself to keep my eyes shut, to breathe deeply, to go through all the exercises of waking. *Listen, smell, feel.* Be calm. Relax. Let the hard-won reflexes come into play, open to the new modes of perception developed through months of patient training. Gravity greater than Earth-normal; heavy infrared, no ultraviolet. Am I underground? An underground hall which echoing voices make me visualize as high, round . . . artificial?

And filled with a light that made me blink several times. At first I did not see the walls of the chamber; they were lost in the blinding glare. Then the adjustment

was made: the light came from the walls themselves, from the floor, the dome. Stone? It was like glass, mirrors. Looking down at my feet, I saw my image reflected from a depth that made me dizzy.

I rose with the slow movements of a tightrope walker and walked up to the nearest walls; dimensions were misleading in that shadowless light. I suddenly saw a tiny silhouette appear in the light, stop when I did. . . . A few more steps and at once she was near me, dark and stocky with short curly brown hair. I reached out and touched the hand of my reflection in the wall.

It was a peaceful world, this world underground. There were three different races there: the one that lived in the soil, just below the surface; the one that had buried itself deeper, in the layers of rocks; and the third, descended from heretical adventurers, that had established itself above.

How they said that word, my peace-loving rock-Ckariast! "Above": a mixture of amazement, reluctant admiration and near religious awe. "Above": in the free air.

Gigantic storms perpetually tore across the surface of the planet, making it uninhabitable: Echneng's climate had entered an unstable cycle a few thousand years earlier, forcing its living species to adapt or perish. The Ckariast had adapted. According to their tradition, the world above was the demon kingdom. But the Dèj Ckariast, the Ckariast of the Above, had dug upward, had dug, dug until they had come up . . . above the Above: a mountain whose summit rose higher than the turbulent zones. The first explorers had died of asphyxiation. The others, protected by the mountain's inner walls—where most of them still lived anyway—had developed a technology that made life possible at that altitude.

Hundreds of years later, they were the ones who had invented the equivalent of the Bridge, of course. They didn't call it by that name: as is the case in many universes, it didn't work for them as it does for us; they used it for industrial research. Yes, they'd already launched their first manned spacecraft. Yes, they'd contacted other life forms; no, none of them looked like me.

None?

Why had the Bridge sent me to that particular universe?

I was still very young.

It was a few days after the implanting of the sensors. I hadn't yet gotten used to that deluge of data, especially the radio waves. I walked like a drunken woman. Later, they train the brain to integrate, to sift, not to translate everything into delirious perceptions. But then it was like a drug; every movement triggered waves of sensation that grew wider and wider, and interfered with normal perceptions in the most bizarre ways. I lived in the middle of a vibrant colored sphere, full to the breaking point.

Some do break at that stage. I was breaking too, as a chrysalis does. It was the first true step on the Bridge, that metamorphosed body.

Egon—I didn't call him Tieheart anymore—shook his

head (waves of light, tinkling of crystals): "You've been walking on the Bridge for a long time, Kathryn."

"But it's nothing to just think about it, wish for it!" (My own voice came to me through weirdly textured distances.) "It's nothing even to get here. One has to go through the trials, pass the tests. That's where it all really begins!"

Oh, I knew it well, I knew it all! First, the sensors; then all the work on bones, muscles, nerves—surgery, treatments, exercises, all the trainings that turn each Voyager into a survival machine. The remaining part is less spectacular, but that's where many aspirants fail: the remodeling of the brain, turning it into a perfect recorder. Integration of data, eidetic memory . . . Voyagers leave naked; their only camera and tapes are their eyes and ears, their only computer is their memory, their ability to correlate and their capacity to learn. The perfection of their training will determine the quality of what they bring back to the Center when they return.

That is, those who return to this universe, this planet. And those who agree to return to the Center.

It is said that certain monitors know in advance which ones will return. Egon smiled. "Nobody can know that." His eyes clouded over. "Nobody."

"Haven't you ever felt like going?"

He stretched slowly, like a cat, and I felt a kind of anguish at the perfection of all those smooth curves propagating themselves slowly through space. We had not been lovers long, and with the sensors . . .

"I thought I wanted to. The Bridge showed me I did not."

Egon, a Voyager? One who'd never left. The desire faded, replaced by a shudder. He must have seen my thoughts in my eyes: "No, the Bridge doesn't decide, Kathryn. *You* decide. Your mind does. But sometimes you cannot know before trying the Bridge. I'd guessed it really, I wasn't very surprised when I woke up here."

"Not disappointed, at least?"

He barely hesitated: "No."

"But you stayed on at the Center."

"I knew where my place was."

He'd been a monitor for ten years; he watched others leave. And it didn't do anything to him?

It took me some time to understand. He did not watch the Voyagers leave: he was waiting for a Voyager, a woman, to return.

During the two and a half years it took to prepare me for the Voyage, I only saw one Voyager return. She came back at night; it was beginning to snow. We were in the common room. When the bell rang, Egon sat up in his chair; I saw his knuckles whiten on the armrests. Then he relaxed; with a sigh he went out to open the door. When he returned ten minutes later, he said, "It's a woman Voyager, one of old." A wave of excitement passed through the aspirants. Egon went back to his reading.

The next day, the Voyager was in the dining hall. I watched her with hungry eyes. From afar: I'd been in the Center long enough to know that one does not throw

oneself at returning Voyagers. I was disappointed, of course: no halo around her head, her feet touched ground. She was a normal, ordinary woman. Then her gaze met mine and I lowered my eyes to my plate, heart pounding. It might take months, years, to learn from her what she'd seen, what she'd lived through. But she had come *back*. She had mastered the Voyage.

There was a poet among the Marrous. (Actually, their word for "poet" means "gate"; on my third Voyage, I was beginning to appreciate the finer shades of meaning. Theory, in the Center, is one thing. But reality . . . varied, so infinitely complex! And yet, the Bridge always does send us to those universes which are most like our own. . . .) Anyway, Mirrn knew of the Bridge only by hearsay: he'd never been to Aigna, the other continent where a woman Voyager had, centuries earlier, shown his ancestors how to build the machine for traveling between universes—a machine that did not work for them, but Mirrn, the poet, the gate, understood very well.

I was also coming to understand better why they tell us nothing at the Center. Oh, the functioning of the Bridge itself is no mystery. Everyone knows what it's about even before arriving at the Center. And we're taught the technology of the Bridge in full detail, since we must be able to have one built if necessary, to continue our Voyages. In a way, it's very simple: the sphere where we are made to lie down takes us on a brief motionless journey to the heart of cold, to absolute zero. But that is not the Voyage. The Voyage begins when the movement of the molecules stops, and when something called our mind (for want of a better word; would "matrix" be better?) frees itself from space and time and takes along the matter which supports it.

Freed from space and time: from *our* space and time, here, in this universe. Time is different, perhaps, in other universes, for certain Voyagers, according to the Archives, have come back only a few years after their departure—but a whole lifetime had gone for them; and others, gone for a half-century, had aged only a few months. (And Egon waits for his Voyager, Talitha, who left, and may never return.)

No, the mechanism of the Bridge is not a complete mystery; but that of the Voyage itself . . . *Our mind draws us into other universes. Those universes usually resemble ours; even if we wake up on an unknown planet, there is usually some means there of getting to another Bridge; either it is to be found on the planet itself, or the scientific and technological level of one of the societies on the planet permits the construction of a Bridge; or the planet's inhabitants have developed space flight and can send the Voyager to where he or she will find a Bridge, or can have one built. In some universes, the Bridge-wielding race cannot use it as we do. On the other hand, Voyagers from several other universes have come through to us. . . .*

And that's all they say. Experience has taught them that a more detailed knowledge of the process only confuses it and makes the Voyage more difficult. Voyagers must leave naked, with only one certainty: the Voyage

cannot be directed voluntarily. At least, not in the beginning. This is probably why the Bridge's history is so monotonous in those universes where rigid, totalitarian societies have managed to invent it. The only way to direct the Voyage is to kill the Voyager—to kill his or her mind, to erase it while keeping the body alive, and to reprogram it by impressing upon it only the image of the desired destination.

(Of course, this is what horrified me the most when I consulted the Center's Archives: the thought of those zombies forever deprived of themselves. Yet I always returned to it, with a morbid fascination.)

Why use the Bridge to get richer, indeed, or more powerful? The Bridge is not *profitable*. There is no immediate benefit to be gotten out of it; the process is too aleatory. The maintenance of a Center is the most disinterested activity in the world. What Voyagers bring, usually, is ideas, different ideas, born of different bodies and environments. The Center is knowledge for knowledge's sake, really. Much more than that, or much less, it's the open door, the constant reminder that something else exists, elsewhere.

Egon listened to me as I preached at the new aspirants, and smiled. I thought it was approval, but it was indulgence, tinged with sadness: he knew that was not really why I had come to the Center, why I wanted to leave.

At the end of my stay in the Center, I'd changed my tune somewhat. After all, one can't learn *nothing* in two and a half years. I talked about self-knowledge now, total mastery of one's psyche.

Egon kept on smiling.

"Your mind draws you," Mirm the poet remarked to me. "And you don't really know what it contains. You did arrive in the forest, didn't you?"

Toward adolescence, young Marrous leave their families. It is not a socially dictated custom, it is a call which comes from the deepest part of themselves, and which no Marrou society has been able to resist successfully and survive afterward. They go to the sea and then return, along the lakes, through the forest. And somewhere between the sea and the forest, some young Marrous fall down on all fours, their teeth and nails grow long, the down that covers them turns into thick fur, and a Marrou family, failing to see its child return, shakes its head and says: "He wasn't able to come out of the sea," or "She couldn't leave her tree."

And on my third Voyage, I woke up in the forest, and lived there just as an animal for weeks, having apparently lost all my memory. Until the day when, suddenly, living in a tree and eating its fruit were no longer enough for me. Searching then without knowing what I searched for, I found a village. And I met Mirm, the gate, the poet, who taught me their language and told me where a Bridge could be found.

As far as the young Marrous were concerned, I thought I understood very well; regression at puberty, recessive genes kicking in, evolutionary recapitulation gone awry, whatever: I had plenty of answers. But Mirm shook his head gently: "No, no. It is the water and the earth, the

forest, the lakes, or the sea. We are made of the same substance. They are our other faces, our other voices. We must struggle with them to know who we are, to exhaust our childhood dreams. When the old dreams are acted out, we return as Marrous to the villages. Some people remain prisoners of their old dreams; they cannot invent new ones. They stay out there."

Was every Voyage then, for us, an exhausted dream? And when all the dreams are exhausted . . . we come back? Voluntarily?

At the Center, they only say: It is your mind which directs the Voyage. Your whole mind, not just your conscious will. Thus the Voyage is different for each individual. And each one must learn to know one's mind, one's whole mind, in order to control the Voyage some day.

There are methods for this in several universes: yoga, zen, kaadith, mélentheme . . . They take a long time to master and are difficult to put into practice; sometimes they fail. But Voyagers want to Voyage. The quickest way to learn how to Voyage . . . is still to leave.

And I was so sure I knew what I wished to find.

When I left, it was Egon who accompanied me to the hall of the Bridge. Not out of sentimentality, but because he was on duty at the Bridge that month. He performed the ritual examinations, declared me physically fit to leave, helped me take off my clothes and lie down in the sphere. He gazed at me for a long time, then smiled. "Keep your eyes open to the last," he said. He leaned down, his lips brushed the tip of one of my nipples, and he left.

I pushed the button and the lid closed slowly, isolating me in the semidarkness lit by pilot lights. The liquid began to trickle into the cockpit. It's very strange: you are completely desensitized by the drug, you only feel, as though it were very far away, the liquid slowly covering you. It seems you are about to suffocate, but then the drug reaches the brain and everything disappears. A moment before that, keeping my eyes open as I was admonished to do by Egon, I saw, by some curious phenomenon of refraction, my image reflected in the fluid above me, looking down on me.

Egon must have learned of this phenomenon through some Voyager, or he may have experienced it himself during his attempted departure. It was his way, no doubt, of telling me that he knew—that he had always known—that I went seeking beyond the Bridge.

It is as if I were always getting closer without ever reaching it. After the universe of the Ckarias, that of the Marrous, and the ten or so others in which vessels of all kinds took me to Earths of all kinds, I now manage to arrive directly at my destination. Sometimes even on the very continent where the Center is located (sometimes it's in Tibet, like on my own Earth, sometimes in France; elsewhere, it's on a continent that was never called America). And sometimes, more and more often, I meet Egon, older or younger, but his eyes never light up when he sees me: he doesn't know me.

The inquiry doesn't take long: not on this Earth either, not in this universe either, will I meet myself.

"Statistically, that's strange," one of the Egons tells me. It is my forty-third Voyage. My father and mother are here; or, rather, the man and the woman who, in my village, live in the house I know well. But the pencil scribbings are not there on the kitchen wall near the door; no child has grown in this house. (Elsewhere, she died at birth, or shortly after; elsewhere, there are other children. Once it was a boy, but I couldn't meet him: he was somewhere in the Amazon jungles, getting killed for his country.)

They've insisted on accompanying me to the Center, as they often do. This man who is not my father, this woman who is not my mother kiss me at the threshold of the Bridge: they bid farewell to this tired woman who is their daughter, somewhere, in another universe.

They say nothing to you, at the Center. They open the door, they give you food, drink—it's been a long journey. Someone you don't know takes you to a room; you sit down on the narrow bed. The window is dark, it's winter, night comes early. The door closes and you lie down with a sigh. Another Voyage in sight, tomorrow or in a few days. And another Earth beyond the Bridge, another Center, another Voyage . . .

Really?

You get up to unpack your bag. The little round mirror hanging on the wall comes to life as you pass. You back up, you look at yourself, half-mockingly: those new little wrinkles, those disappointed eyes, that's you. That's me.

I turn away. I switch off the light, I grope my way to the bed. All those unexplored universes, all those Earths so quickly abandoned without so much as a glance, from where I leaped toward other Earths. . . . Stars are beginning to twinkle in the dark blue rectangle of the window. Tomorrow, I'll ask them if they'll let me stay here.

But the next day, at breakfast, a tall black man gets up at another table and comes toward me, hesitantly. Egon, staring at me. And a crazy hope flares in me for a moment: this one has seen me before; he may have seen a Voyager with my face, someone from elsewhere, my other self, the one I've been seeking for so long in vain!

But Egon says, "Kathryn, you've come back!"

I look around, then—the surroundings so familiar, of course—and anguish takes hold of me: how can I know? I hadn't thought of that when I was dreaming about Kathryn returning. How can I know if I've come back, or if a Voyager named Kathryn has returned to a Center which another Kathryn, also a Voyager, once left, in a universe very similar to my own?

I realize two things at the same time: there's practically no way to know. And it's no longer important.

I smile at Egon, I take him by the shoulders. He hasn't aged much either. I kiss him, I whisper in his ear: "Tal-

itha, did she come back?" He shakes his head; he doesn't seem too sad. (He knows what I'm talking about: a proof? But he could also be waiting for a Talitha in this universe. . . .)

The next day, and the following days, they don't press me to tell about my Voyages. I know they won't ask me anything: the Voyager must choose, must speak. In the common room, I idly watch the falling snow: the Center is wrapped in a magnificent blizzard, the sky has vanished, swirls of white obliterate the earth.

"We could be anywhere, couldn't we?" Egon says behind me.

I smile at his reflection in the glass pane. "I could be somewhere else."

He purses his lips doubtfully. When I told him a bit about my Voyages, he said, as other Egons had: "Statistically, that's strange." He thinks I have come back. I'd like to believe it too. I've contacted my parents. They're waiting for me in the house where I grew up. At least, they're waiting for a Voyager child.

They don't say much to you, at the Center, but they tell you this: the universes that the Bridge opens to us are . . . like a tree. Born of many roots, its trunk divides itself into many branches. Each knot of causality gives birth to another potentiality, which is another tree, with many branches, they too constellated with knots and branches.

It's not really a tree, though; it bears neither leaves nor fruits, and it doesn't grow straight: at the ends of its innumerable ramifications, that could be its roots growing. Our universe-tree might endlessly perpetuate itself that way, born of itself and closed in upon itself, since no truly alien, nonhumanoid Voyagers have ever come to visit the Center.

How do the universes differentiate? It seems that a law rules their unfolding: the knots of causality are to be found mainly on the macromolecular level. Sometimes the difference is obvious: on my own Earth there are no infra-terrestrials, and no aquatic humanity. And sometimes it's impossible to say: it's the place of a pebble, the life or death of a butterfly.

"But you were nowhere else," Egon remarks pensively. "You've never met yourself once. I know of no other example of such a case in our Archives. No, Kathryn, you've really come back."

He touches my cheek and goes back to his work with the would-be Voyagers. I lean my forehead against the pane, which has misted over, banishing the reflections. I have come back. Why not? Why not stay here, in fact, and meditate upon this possibility: sometimes it is the place of a pebble, the life or death of a butterfly—the knot which makes or unmakes a universe.

And this universe exists because it's the one I have come back to. I am the knot. ♦

Dover Beach



Tony Daniel

The squad was gelled into a thick mass in the ship's hold. Time was the color of dirty ice. Corporal Farrel felt the years glide by, felt herself glide with the years, in a sluggish, glacial ooze as the ship cosined in and out of Reality Standard like a clockwork dolphin. After a hundred years passed, she had to go to the bathroom.

The gel was speckled with the partially absorbed feces of the others, like the inside of a filthy aquarium, but Farrel could not bring herself to defecate in the spot where she ate and slept. She reproached herself for her inability to adapt, but kicked off toward the head anyway. What she really wanted was the solitude, Tomorrow—Platoon Relative—she would swallow the pill full of gut bugs and maybe never have to shit again. But the bugs sometimes altered the mind as well as the

Illustration by Gary Freeman

body. She may never want to be alone again, if that was what was required to survive on Dover. The ship would rendezvous with the tech recon late tonight—again, Platoon Relative—and tech would have the division's bugs all ready, in handy little pills.

Farrel always hated moving through the gel. She hated not having to breathe as the gel filled and replenished her lungs, coated her stomach with nutrients. The stuff got into every crack of her body, and its transfinite portion permeated her mind, slowing her thoughts to Ship Relative, with months passing in the blink of an eye. She wished to hell those years were accompanied by the same amount of experience and wisdom. *That* you still had to get the hard way, unfortunately.

Farrel bumped into Rodríguez, the guy next to her, as she swam toward the central tube. Rodríguez half-opened his eyes and stared at Farrel in doped stupor. He saw her as a dark shape, an undefined smear through the gel. For a moment he thought he was back on G13, being stalked by the winged Betas which had decimated half of his squad. He screamed, but the sound was far away from him, thick and full, like distant thunder. Then Farrel patted him on the shoulder and the drug patch on his neck flooded his blood with calming chemicals.

"Just going to take a dump," said Farrel. Or, rather, she transmitted it over the platoon frequency to the receiver in Rodríguez's brain. Her voice, surprisingly thin and airy over the radio, echoed in his head. He gave Farrel a goofy smile, and desperately tried to get back to sleep.

There had been a time when he was young—thousands of years before, a year ago—when sleep was an annoying necessity. What mattered was getting the bakery out of the red, preparing a home for Rosa if—*si te gusto, Maria, Dios, por favor, por favor*—if she would only marry him. But now sleep was all that mattered. Sleep was not fighting and it was not being dead. Those were the alternatives. But, though the gel was as warm as the Rio Grande, Rodríguez could not stop trembling. He cursed his body as the shivering kept him awake. And, with an immediate trace of guilt, he damned Farrel for jolting him out of his peaceful, idiot sleep.

Farrel continued along to the central tube, an area kept more or less clear, defined by the arcing bodies of soldiers on all sides. The head was little more than a screened box riveted to a curving bulkhead of the ship. She could smell it several meters before she got to it: the pile of shit and urine and whatever wastes the tykes and repons excreted were all stuck together in a gob inside the box and were so concentrated that the smell managed to diffuse some distance through the gel. But Farrel had never been particularly revolted by excrement—human or alien—and glided without a problem into the makeshift stall.

She was startled, but not surprised, to find three other members of her squad hunched inside, silently playing radio poker. They were on low wattage and playing partially by sight, which meant that they were gambling

with contraband. Yep. Davis had an assortment of colorful pills and patches floating in front of her and was smiling broadly. She was obviously winning big. Merni, one of the two tykes in the platoon, was all screwed up around himself (or itself, since tykes were hermaphroditic): the tyke body language for worry.

Farrel still found it difficult to believe she could understand the mood of an alien with such ease. She'd never even seen a tyke until six months ago, Platoon Relative. Still, she'd also never gotten over being amused at the way that tykes looked like disembodied, jangled-up spinal cords. The fact that tykes did not have two symmetrical sides to their bodies was, somehow, funny. Well, you laughed at what you could in the gel.

Sergeant Mboya was the third member of the poker party. As usual, his face held no discernible expression. Nevertheless, he was losing. Farrel could never decide if Mboya was stoic or if he was just numb when not fighting. Since Mboya was a cell in Masai, it could very well be that the Ideal had no use for him outside of battle and that, left to himself, he was a stupid man. Farrel didn't know and didn't want to know. Cellheads gave her the creeps, and she had an unfocused anger toward all of them. It was the Ideals that had gotten humans into the war in the first place.

Such thinking was useless, however. Farrel decided to finish her business, then maybe come back and observe the game. Obviously, she wasn't going to find anyplace to be alone. Being by herself had not been a very realistic expectation to begin with.

Before she turned away, Farrel mentally flipped on the low-powered frequency they were using and glanced at the cards. They were playing Mexico Loose rules, so nonplayers could see all the hands. Davis had a pair of sixes showing and Merni had nothing but a mess. Mboya was working on a flush, with three hearts up.

Mboya was not really paying attention to the cards. He'd lost valor patches mostly, for which he, personally, had no need. Masai was strong in him, preparing him for tomorrow's fight. He would never think of troubling the Tribe with card calculation, and Mboya did not really care to keep track himself. He was struggling with a strong desire to reach across the pot and choke Davis to death.

He could not help thinking of her as an enemy. Mboya could never question Masai's wisdom, but he felt he was a defective cell, incapable of properly funneling the righteous hatred which Masai channeled through him for tomorrow's invasion. Then he was disgusted with himself for considering himself the worm that he was, for a cell should not think, but be a unit of thought, a resting place for the Tribe's mind. And Davis kept winning and smiling her gregarious, empty smile and she was a fucking *American*, descendant of slaves, Tribeless.

Save it for Dover, Mboya told himself. The enemy is there. Davis could not help what she was. He even had a grudging admiration for her when she wasn't beating him at poker. She was steady in battle—not something he could say of the others in his squad. Quickly, their

profiles flashed before him, spooling off the Masai Ideal implant which took up the space in his skull where his cerebellum used to be. Mboya forgot the cards and let himself merge with the Ideal. He-Masai inhabited the squad information, felt each data point as if it were a part of his body, a piece of his mind. There was no question of learning the information. It was innate knowledge, as completely revealed and understood as the voice of God to a prophet.

Mboya felt his personality, his dot of awareness, bubble upward, into the higher functions of the Mind of Masai. The ecstasy of Involvement suffused through his body, though he was scarcely aware of the feeling. He was scarcely aware that he existed at all, just as Masai knew the cells of its body only in the abstract, as parts of larger groupings, organs, systems.

Masai was angry, proud and angry. Mboya saw how the outcome of the coming fight could help Masai reposition itself within Africa-Coalition, outflanking upstart Zulu. Somehow, the outcome would also destroy Courage 3, the North American Ideal with the most to lose and the most to gain in all the fighting of this sector. With Courage 3 removed, Masai could maneuver to become the Heart of the human Ideals, the courageous hand of Man. Power. From there, Masai would be in a position to receive the best of the technological enhancements promised by the Tyke-Repon Alliance, if the Earth would only join them in their war against the Betas.

But when Mboya descended from the heights of Masai, he could scarcely recall its thoughts, could not understand what he *did* remember. All he was left with was a certainty that the coming battle must be won. It was important to Masai. And what was important to Masai was all that mattered to Mboya. He worried that with the mediocre squad he commanded, he could not fully serve his Ideal.

And Davis took another hit. Three sixes showing now. He looked at his cards. Busted flush. Damn her, he thought. *I am* going to kill her. She was nothing. A microbe.

"Davis," he said. "You are a lucky bitch."

Davis was deciding whether or not to count her winnings. She knew it was unlucky, but she had a strong urge to finger the patches and pills. She hadn't had so much palpable wealth in a long, long time. Somewhere, dimly, she knew she couldn't really keep this. There was no place to stow most of it. She could take only a few pills down to Dover with her in her private cache—the left front pocket of the uniform she'd be issued tomorrow. The rest would have to stay on the ship, and there was no reason to believe the platoon would ever see this particular ship again.

This thought produced a melancholy in Davis, as she considered all the other things she would never see again. Her friends back in Oak Cliff. Her mother. Of course, with more and more people going Cellhead, it didn't matter so much. They were as good as dead when they went to the hospital to get half their brains scooped out. Before Davis got the draft, her mother had told her

she had decided to join Reverend Boynton's Ministry. Everything her mother owned would become the legal property of the Boynton Ideal. Not that Davis's mother had much of anything. But there were some heirlooms, some *silver* things passed down from the 1900s, and Davis had seen other people in the neighborhood sell off everything they owned, little by little, to support some Ministry or another.

Which was part of the reason she took so much pleasure in her own immediate, individual wealth. Wasn't anybody going to take from her what she didn't want to give. Davis sighed, felt the gel ooze slightly from her mouth as her lungs pushed it out. As she relaxed, it was quickly back in, coating, encompassing. The army sure as hell would take *whatever* it wanted, and make you depend on *it* for your life to boot. So much for escaping the consequences of the higher purposes of others.

At least she had a decent poker hand going. Mboya looked ready to shit bricks. Davis could not understand why old Sarge got so mad when he lost at poker. The cards fell where they did, and you could figure some things out and some things you couldn't. Like now, he was flustered because his flush was busted up, and this told Davis he wasn't hiding any hearts, so he was busted for real. So all he could do was fold if he knew what was good for him.

Mboya raised her a couple of patches. For a moment, Davis felt sorry for him. He was always fighting, even when, if he relaxed, he could get out of the jam he was in. Of course, sergeants could probably be that way, contentious and cranky. He'd sure as hell seen them through some deep shit on G13. The tyke, Merni, matched Mboya's raise. Merni was, in some ways, hard to figure, but he really didn't have a grasp of poker, that was for sure. Davis wondered if tykes were actually intelligent at all, or if they were more like really smart dogs.

Merni was aware that Private Davis was nonplussed by him. The problem at the moment was that he was aware of so many things at once that integration was not possible. This game of poker was hell on his algorithms. Merni thought of himself as a "he" in much the same way a doctor or a baseball player thinks of himself as belonging to his chosen profession. As long as he was a soldier, Merni would not bear children, so he was, by avocation, a male. But if he did not take care to get his thoughts in order, he might make himself pregnant with worry. That was a survival trait built into tyke physiology, and controllable only by mental will. There were algorithms one could ingest that could alter the self-impregnating effect, but those also dulled the wits and destroyed any desire to carry on under difficult circumstances. Every tyke had to fight a personal, internal battle when he was a soldier, not to become a pregnant female.

Merni consulted his poker table and saw that there were no permutations that could lead to victory in this hand. But his learning subsets informed him that deception was possible. It was clear that Sergeant Mboya did not have five cards of the same suit and was bluffing. But Private Davis was a cipher. Merni's probability algo-

rioth not even calculate an analysis of Private Davis's actions. Private Davis raised again, and Merni was a mass of weighings and calculations, each furiously working separately from the others.

Such disassociation might serve him well if he were back home, among the rubbing bodies and intricate interconnections of his own kind, but here with these humans, it was a decided disadvantage. There was no sharing of information, no synthesis of opinion. Merni felt himself to be a motor disengaged from its gears, churning and turning to no purpose. Utterly useless and alone. So what if the humans were helping the tykes far more than they were helped? It was so lonely out here among them.

Back home the mates had probably forgotten all about him. Mates could be so unfaithful. Sure, his analog was still on the net, talking the talk. But that wasn't really him, wasn't *Merni*. By the time he got back, his mates would probably like the analog better than him. Happened all the time with soldiers. Ten thousand years is a long time to wait for somebody, and he really wouldn't blame his mates if they didn't wait for *him*. Merni decided that he'd caused himself enough distress for the time being: he folded his hand.

Davis smiled at this. At least the tyke knew a little bit of what was good for it, unlike old Sarge, who was digging his own grave. She raised Mboya some fire bug pills. These she would surely try to keep and take down to the planet with her, so she'd hate to lose them. They could restructure you into a rock or a tree or just about anything for an hour or so. Then they'd reverse themselves. Could save your ass to pop one of those babies. Illegal as hell, too.

She'd seen a soldier on G13 running from a Beta with wings that had to be twenty feet across homing in on the soldier's infrared little ass and the guy had popped a fire bug just as the Beta was on top of him and, just like that, turned into a flock of moths. Of course, the moths were Earth moths, not structured for G13's carbon-dioxide atmosphere, and had frozen in mid-air and cracked to the ground. No way they'd be changing back into anything recognizable as human. You had to be careful with fire bugs. Still, she *would* be careful and would only take along pills that turned you into a rock or something like that. She wouldn't mind being a rock, even for a long time. Even forever.

She needn't have worried about losing the pills to Mboya. He was furiously bluffing, and raised her five more patches. It was time to call, and Davis reluctantly did so. Old Sarge was getting pretty worked up, and she was uneasy about taking the pot yet again. He wouldn't show first, despite the rules, and so Davis mentally flipped over her cards. Three sixes, ace high. With a low sound that came across on the radio as a primordial grunt, Mboya launched himself at Davis.

She'd been somewhat prepared, but the man was ferocious and no stranger to brawling in null gravity. He had her pinned into immobility in a moment, with one hand holding to her arm for resistance, and the other

whaling on her. The gel slowed his movements, but there was power in his arms and each blow smarted. Davis remembered the first time she'd been hit by a man, a boyfriend she'd had in high school. Crazy, she tried to remember his name while Mboya pummeled her. Fred-eric? No, Cedric. That was it. He'd punched her in the stomach and next day she'd snuck up behind him on the street and laid him out with a tire iron. Or maybe she'd just imagined doing so. Whatever the case, she realized that if she did that to Mboya, the army would court-martial her. She'd better let him go at her and hope he didn't hurt her too bad.

"Hey, Sarge. Stop that, goddamn it, Sarge," and Farrel's arms were around Mboya, pulling him back. He twisted hard to the right, but the gel slowed him.

"Merni, would you fucking help me out here?" said Farrel. The tyke wrapped its stalky appendages around one of Mboya's arms. The three tumbled about the latrine in sluggish free fall, banging into walls and rebounding in slow motion.

After a moment, Mboya stopped struggling. He tensed with horror and awe, expecting Masai to fill his mind with reproach, maybe *kill* him with it. Nothing happened. He was beneath notice. He relaxed, suffused with shame and disappointment; Farrel and Merni let go of him. He thought he'd gotten used to it, but he began to smell the concentrated shit nearby once again. It reminded him of his childhood.

"What the hell did Davis do?" asked Farrel. She kicked back away from Mboya a pace or two, not sure that he wouldn't take after *her*.

"She's a bitch," Mboya growled over his comunit. "She is a sorry *amoeba*."

Davis was busy gathering up what she could of her winnings while keeping an eye on Mboya. "I never did nothing to you, Sarge," she said.

"Get the hell out of my sight," Mboya said. Davis grabbed a couple more pills, then made for the opening to the head. She quickly swam around the corner of the wall and took off.

"Sarge—" said Farrel.

"Leave me the hell alone, Farrel," Mboya replied, and turned away from his corporal.

Farrel didn't know what to do. She noticed Merni slinking out of the head. Damn tyke was worried he was going to overload and get pregnant, Farrel thought. Tykes were such bundles of nerves and nothing else. She decided to go ahead and obey Mboya. He looked utterly miserable, and it was painful to be around him. What had gotten into him? Weren't the Cellheads supposed to have a broader view on things, to not let petty quarrels distract them? She never could figure Idealists out, which was part of the reason she'd never become one herself.

What she really needed was to get out of this gel and move about in freedom. She'd get her chance tomorrow, all right, but that was different; tomorrow would be *war* and there was no real freedom there. At least she could

try to get out of this damn ship's hold. Before she left, she looked around and found one of the pills that Davis had overlooked in her haste to escape the head.

Farrel swam out of the head and squirmed her way up to the hatch. There were a couple of tyke MPs guarding the exit, looking all loosened out and bored. Tykes had peculiar eyes, Farrel knew, with no bifocal vision. She'd seen them looking two ways at once on G13 and in basic training back on the *El Dorado*. There was really no way to distract them. But the pill she'd brought was a Brown Bomber, or at least looked like one. You couldn't really test the labeling with fire bugs.

Nevertheless, Farrel's yearning for solitude overcame her caution. There was no way the casing would dissolve in her gel-coated stomach, so she broke the pill open and licked the bitter microbial robots off her fingers. She could feel the tingling as the bugs went to work.

Before she was transformed, she scissored her legs hard and headed straight for the exit hatch. Then she felt a complete dryness come over her; her insides felt like a cookie left too long in the air, crumbling from her toes upward. Then her head crumbled, too. Nothing. Nothing.

Farrel was through the hatch, out into the galleyway that led to the troop hold, when the nanobots reconstructed her. She suppressed a laugh and squelched her comunit. It was unlikely that the tyke sentries would notice her, but you never could tell. She wondered what she had looked like as she floated past them, transformed to dirt. Probably like the rest of the general shit that floated about in the hold. Nothing special. Plain old shit.

A little way down the galleyway, and she had reached the ship's hull. There was no one around. The crew was getting ready for the rendezvous tomorrow, she supposed, or sleeping. The hull was translucent to visual light, but thick, so that the flickering stars were smears of luminescence, as the ship moved in and out of real space. Like a movie, Farrel thought. A movie in slow motion, when you can see the frames click by. The effect was eerie, unnatural, but Farrel felt immense relief to be *by herself*. It had been days, a hundred years, since she'd last been free of the press of bodies.

She'd never been one for crowds, even back on the Moon. Farrel had been a little surface-hopper as a youngster. That was during the time when the bugs were first being developed, the really powerful ones. Her parents—a librarian and a water plant roustabout—had spent their small savings on her transformation injections full of the early bugs. She'd been free to wander the surface, without suit or air, while most of the others felt their world through an inch of fabric or, for those who had no business or desire to be on the surface, not at all.

So it had been no big surprise when she joined the Patrol, doing crater and mountain rescues and inspecting operations for safety violations. Closest thing the Moon had to a military, and so the first to be drafted when the tykes and repons showed up with their promises. A soldier for knowledge, the draft board had told her. For her efforts, humanity would gain the stardrive.

A stardrive that was not a hell of a lot faster than light, true, but fast enough. Fast enough for government work.

What Farrel thought was that a mercenary was a mercenary, whatever the pay. Not that she had any choice. She could have run to the Belt, she supposed, but what kind of life was that? Maybe better than *this* one. Well, what the hell. How could she have known at the time?

What she missed most, she guessed, was the black edge of the night, the Earth hanging on the horizon with strange blue fire. The silent crunch of meteor loam. The heat and freeze of running through a shadow. Lots of things. The Moon had been a good place to grow up, to live a life worth something. All gone now. Nothing to go back to. Most of the time these days, she didn't feel like what she was doing was worthwhile. The opposite, in fact—that this life was nothing but trouble.

Then the flicker of the ship's travel began to slow, with longer and longer stretches of reality interspersing the void of nothingness between. The outside brightened. There was the bright blast of what could only be a sun, close up. The ship yawed and nosed downward, as if it were a rifling bullet, though Farrel knew it was shaped more like a mushroom than a projectile.

For the first time, Farrel was oriented. She knew which way was down. Below, Dover filled the black sky.

She was a beautiful planet, as blue-white as Earth, but uniform, without nearly the cloud cover. Farrel couldn't make out any land. The blurring of the ship's hull was probably blending whatever land there was in with the general blueness of the planet. It was not water, Farrel had been told, but liquid methane, a single ocean dotted with innumerable islands of some kind of cold, hard rock. Soon she would be at home there, adapted to breathe whatever made up the atmosphere (nitrogen?), with skin tough enough so that her innards wouldn't be crushed in the high pressure. As tough as the "vegetation" that was supposed to cover the islands. Sentient. The enemy.

But at the moment there was no way that Farrel could think of the planet as evil. Dover was gorgeous, as pretty as Earth. It had been so long. Farrel drank in the sight. She was so very far away from home, but this was something. This sight would last her for a while. Maybe forever, whether she wanted it or not. Then the ship began to roll again, away from the planet. Farrel let out a whimper of dismay, but it carried not a centimeter in the all-pervasive gel.

Now the sky was full of ships, and the firing of giant engines of destruction. The tyke ships were intricate, looking like ropes of neurons, delicately stretched across nothingness. Somehow or another, the tykes generated static energy within the network of each ship and fired it downward in packets of pure fire, like deadly neuro-transmitters.

Farrel felt a mixture of disgust, awe and terror. What a horrible, beautiful thing this war was. She'd give anything to have never seen it, but now that she *had*, she felt she could die knowing that, by God, she'd seen *something*, something wonderful. Only after a long, long time—Platoon Relative, Reality Standard—did she make her way back into the hold.

The tyke guards thought she was some visiting officer for a moment, as she careened like a mad whale back past them, and by the time they realized that she was a disobedient corporal, she'd merged with the mass of bodies and could not be distinguished from all the other soldiers.

Rodriguez awoke to Farrel's shaking. He lashed out at her, but she was expecting something like that, and pulled back. Oh, no, he thought. No. No. No.

"Get moving, Betabait," Farrel said through the com- unit. "We're getting bugged and bugging out."

"Let me sleep."

"I already have, Betabait. Me and you are the last of the platoon in the hold. Come on, Rodriguez."

"All right. *Cristo*. All right."

Rodriguez felt the shivering begin again, uncontrollable. He swam a few strokes, and that seemed to help bring it under control. But then an all-pervading dread diffused through his mind and body. He was certain, as if the voice of God had spoken to him, that today was the day he would die. "I ain't ready for this, Corporal."

Farrel looked at him for a long moment, and shook her head. "No. I don't guess you would be."

"G13 was hell."

"Then Dover can only be better."

"I'm thinking there are deeper levels to hell."

They made their way to the gel-lock, and caught up with the others in the squad just as they were going in. When the whole platoon—sixteen soldiers—was through the outer hatch, Mboya pushed a button, and the cover slid into place. The room was immediately full of the sickening sound of the gel being siphoned out. To Rodriguez, it sounded like the last breath of pleurisy-clogged lungs.

It did *feel* much better when the gel was gone, replaced by air—of whatever composition the atmosphere on G13 had been, since that was the squad's latest adaptation.

"Guess we have to shit the normal way now," said Davis. She used her real voice, which rang metallic in the cylindrical lock. It made Rodriguez flinch to hear it.

"What would that be for you, Davis?" said Farrel, speaking through her vocal cords as well. "Out the mouth?"

"Yeah, well, fuck you," Davis replied, but with a smile. She spoke each word fully, with pauses between them.

"Proves my point perfectly," Farrel said, stumbling over the unaccustomed use of a real string of p's.

Rodriguez did not like the joking. He felt cold and naked.

Then the other hatch slid open and they crawled through, into their landing craft. It was made of tough, heat-resistant fiber. There were no windows, of course. Soldiers didn't need a view. Rodriguez didn't mind. He was afraid of heights. Before he was drafted, he'd never been into space, and only once been in an aircraft. Mboya and the other squad's sergeant, Amundsen, were already handing out the bugs.

Time to change into another kind of demon, Rodriguez thought gloomily. He took the pill and tried to swallow

it without thinking, but it hung up in his throat. He gagged, and had to force it down with the mixture of vomit and spit that had risen into his mouth.

The bugs did their work quickly and completely. Rodriguez felt himself becoming something different, something not right. It felt like a sickness was spreading out from his gut, like gangrene at a thousand times normal speed. Then the restructuring and adaption was complete. He looked at his arms and whimpered in dismay. All motley scales, wrinkled and pallid as a corpse. New atmosphere hissed into the craft.

Merni and the other tyke were the only ones who did not change very much. The tyke remained his usual bluish-white color. But he sent a small cry over the radio. Evidently something inside him had been drastically rearranged. Rodriguez found that he really didn't care *what* happened to the tykes. And then he reflected that he didn't particularly care what happened to *any* of them, including himself. He was far away from this, observing. Today was the day he would die. How interesting.

The mood didn't last long. As the craft separated from the ship and crashed downward, the platoon shrugged into their uniforms. Rodriguez noticed Davis taking out a handful of pills from God knew what crevice of her new body and putting them into her breast pocket. He had nothing to transfer. What sort of reminder of his former life could he carry? A stale pastry from the bakery? A picture of the woman who was dead a thousand years, who would not be waiting when he came home? But he'd forgotten. He wouldn't be coming home.

Then the craft entered the atmosphere, and they all grabbed handholds as the ship shuddered in the cold whip of nitrogen winds. The fall to the planet went on and on. Rodriguez closed his eyes, tried to sleep. No way. It was the worst sort of monotony, too bone-jarring to let you think of anything more pleasant.

Then they pulled out of the dive. Rodriguez could tell because, for the first time in days, there was a floor beneath him, a ceiling over his head. Mboya and Amundsen broke out the weapons, slender rifles that fired . . . who knew? His boot camp instructor had explained, but Rodriguez had not really understood and had not had the will to ask the bastard to repeat himself. What did it matter anyway? Some new strange fire, inhuman.

The craft circled and circled. Rodriguez broke out in whatever passed for a sweat in this new body. He did not want to land, but this delay was almost as intolerable.

"Think they're ever going to set us down, Sarge?" Davis finally said. She spoke in an uncommonly deferential tone of voice.

"This really gets on my nerves," said Merni. "But we're a much smaller target up here. It's a proven fact."

As if in answer, something exploded nearby and sent them all reeling. The craft faltered a moment, then resumed its course.

"First wave's still fucking around," Mboya said. "Be glad we're up here."

"Boy, am I *glad* we're up here," said Farrel. "Like goddamn sitting ducks."

Then the craft lurched into free fall, and Rodriguez

had to fight with all his might to keep from throwing up. It was coming: the end, closer, closer.

And with a roar of retrothrust, they slowed and dropped to the ground. Explosives fired, and one side of the landing craft broke away. The platoon stormed out. Rodriguez couldn't believe his arms and legs were responding, but he was out with the rest of them.

Onto a beach. With milk-white crystal sand. Methane lapped at the shore, and at the bodies that littered it. A deep aquamarine jungle came up to the other edge of the beach. There were holes ripped through it at intervals, with tendrils of vines snaking outward toward them, quivering in the breeze.

Nothing stirred except the platoon. Sounds were dull and close in the heavy atmosphere.

A ball of fire suddenly waivered over them. Rodriguez dove for the ground, screaming. He realized almost instantly that it was friendly fire, but his arms were trembling so much that Farrel had to help him pull himself up. Would this never end? Why couldn't he just go to sleep? They couldn't *make* him wake up. But he could not sleep here, so exposed. At least on G13, they'd had rocky cover from the moment they invaded. Somehow it seemed to Rodriguez much more terrible to die out in the open, under Dover's huge, cloudless sky.

Mboyra glanced at Rodriguez with distaste. Then Amundsen took him by the arm and the two stepped away a few paces to consult. Mboyra respected Amundsen as a competitor. Amundsen was a cell in Elite, and was a brave soldier in an aloof, European sort of way. He had ice in his veins where Mboyra had fire.

"Obviously we need to find some command and control," Amundsen said.

"But we shouldn't abandon the beach," said Mboyra. "I'll go look for an officer, and you stay here."

There was no telling if more valor was to be gained by staying or going. Mboyra didn't know whether to agree or to fight to go. This was too much like poker. No certainty, nothing like the certainty he knew within the mind of Masai.

"All right, we'll stay. Maybe we can burn back some of this goddamn jungle."

Without another word, Amundsen grouped his squad and they marched into the jungle down one of the trails that had already been cut by those who had preceded the platoon.

"Let's set it for broad, and burn away the sides of that trail over there. No way it's wide enough to take a hover," Mboyra called out to the squad. Mboyra gripped his rifle in firing position and felt the rifle's menu selection pop up in his mind as the weapon's algorithm traveled up his arms and into his brain. Masai reached for control of the rifle and integrated it within the huge structure of its own programming storied in the transfinite egg at the back of Mboyra's skull. Mboyra felt brittle and empty, an iron conduit for the will of his Tribe.

This was the reason he had given his life to Masai, this transcendence, this exaltation. At this moment, he was on the cutting edge of a million minds. He could

not make a wrong decision, did not even have responsibility for his own actions. He was an instrument of power higher than the puny individual. Never again would the other children taunt him: "Mboyra will not join in the game. He's sullen and thinks he's better and smarter." Or, later, when he went away to trade school: "Mboyra does not like women. He'd rather beat his meat to the stars." Never again, because he'd *joined*, damn them all. He'd joined in the biggest way.

"Form a line on this side," Mboyra called out, and the squad obeyed. "Ready arms."

The growth on the side of the trail was crystalline, but looked very much alive. It smelled like moldy bread. Mboyra grabbed a handful of jungle and pulled. It came away easily in his hand, all shallow roots and feelers. "This should burn nicely," he said, and stepped back into the line.

"I hear whispers," said Rodriguez. Mboyra glanced over at the man. This was the first thing Rodriguez had said since they'd landed on the planet. It was hard to tell where Rodriguez's fear left off and his cunning began. The Mexican could be a good soldier in the squad, when he wasn't shaking like a leaf. "There are ghosts here."

Masai growled in Mboyra's mind. This jungle must not stand.

"Fire!" shouted Mboyra.

The squad opened up full blast on the jungle. It sputtered and crinkled back from the energy. The stench of burnt toast filled the air. The rifle felt organic to Mboyra, a part of his body and brain. Masai was strong in anger. *This jungle must not stand.* So many plans hinged on this jungle's destruction. Other tribes must give way; Masai must triumph.

"Advance and fire!" Mboyra said. The soldiers walked forward a few paces over the charred remains. Merni, who walked in a manner similar to a sidwinding rattler, had trouble negotiating the uneven mounds.

"Something coming," said Rodriguez, but he, too, advanced.

"What in the hell are you talking about?" Davis said, finding her place in the line and looking about wildly.

"Ghosts."

"Shut up and fire!" said Mboyra. For a moment, he felt like turning his rifle on Davis. Frightened, tribeless coward. Rodriguez and Farrel had excuses for bring worthless nothings. Who would want to join an ideal that was not also a tribe? And the tyke? Who the hell knew *what* a tyke thought? Who cared? But Davis had had the opportunity. Her fathers were of Africa; she had the blood of warriors in her. All wasted. He turned the anger back to the jungle and opened fire.

A breeze seemed to whip down the side of the trail on which the squad was working. Tendrils began to writhe as if in a strong but uncertain wind.

"Incoming algorithm," said Farrel. "I guess we got its attention."

"Oh shit, oh shit," Davis moaned. She fumbled with the zipper of her left breast pocket.

Mboyra felt the edge of Masai's anger in his mind. *Lit-*

the jungle-mind, how dare you defy me? I'll crush your world. But now was the time to step away, to let the anger grow to a new strength.

"Fall back!" said Mboya with bitterness.

He covered their backs as the others turned and skidded their way toward the trail. All but Merni, who had lost his hold among the destroyed tendrils and had fallen. The tyke's squirming to get up only left him more entangled. Mboya moved to help him extract himself.

As he was cutting at the vines with a thin beam from his rifle, the jungle exploded.

Tendrils from the still-living edge arched over Mboya and Merni like a net, blackening the sky. With a complicated shrug, Merni managed to free his rifle and pointed it straight into the sky. Oh, my dear, lost mates, let it still be set on *wide*, he thought. The weapon sprayed upward, cutting a hole in the descending vines, which fitted neatly around Mboya and him as the grasping mass crashed down. But the edges of the hole immediately began to grow together, like a wound healing at lightning speed.

Mboya began to blast away at the side that led to the pathway and freedom.

"Help me," said Merni. Subroutines buzzed in his brain, setting his body jerking in all directions, tangling him further. "Sergeant, I can't get out!"

Mboya heard Merni somewhere far away, in a corner of his mind that no longer had access to his arms and legs. Masai was all-dominant. *The hand of Masai must survive on this planet. Nothing matters more. All others are cells to be sloughed when they are no longer useful.* Mboya had to escape. *His survival was far more important than Merni's.* Behind him, he could feel the eerie movement start again. The jungle was readying for another lunge.

Halfway out, he almost cut his way into Davis, who was burning her own path *back in*. What was the idiot trying to do?

"Get back, Davis!" he screamed. "Get back, and that's an order."

But Davis did not hear him. Her face was bloated with exertion and her eyes were wide with some emotion on the other side of terror. What in hell is she up to? Mboya wondered. Then he knew. *She's come back for me.* This realization burst in Mboya's mind with pure pain, absolute hate. Masai-Mboya flared in righteous indignation at the thought of a tribeless one rescuing *It*. Davis charged past Mboya, and he swung around, leveled his rifle on her back. *No one* humiliated Masai.

And the jungle rained down, burning, burning. Something caustic in the foliage, on his skin, in his eyes. He felt his bowels go, and wetness run down the legs of his uniform.

A million minds can't be wrong, thought Mboya. I've made the right choices. But the feeling of sureness was hollow, unreal, for it came out of an implanted box. He could not know, never really *know*, if joining Masai had been worthwhile. I am burning to death in my own shit, Mboya thought. How could this have happened?

And as a vine ate through to his brain, Mboya died uncertain of anything.

By the time Davis got to Merni, the tyke had managed to blast another hole in the descending vines, keeping himself from being enveloped. The organic, singed smell was nearly overpowering. Davis feverishly cut away the tendrils that held Merni, then picked him up and slung him over her shoulder, as if he were a great, lumpy bag of flour. She charged back toward the pathway, firing madly ahead as she ran. Jungle burned at her thighs, slowing her down. With a clear, unemotional jolt, she realized she wasn't going to make it back.

Already the jungle must be regrouping. But she was so close. There was Farrel, jumping up to see over the edge of the net of vines, cheering her on. Then Farrel disappeared back behind the all-encompassing wall of tendrils. Davis was filled with an intense love of Farrel, of all the squad, and was disappointed that she was going to let them down.

Davis stumbled over something soft and cakelike. She looked down and saw that it was Mboya, now mostly dissolved. He stank. She stepped over him and continued onward, losing strength as her legs were being slowly eaten away. Ahead, there was a flare of energy and suddenly Rodriguez and Farrel were with her.

"Give us Merni," Farrel shouted. "We'll carry him from here. It's not far."

For a second, Davis didn't know what Farrel was talking about, but Merni began to squirm on her shoulder and she remembered. She handed him over to Farrel and Rodriguez, who distributed him between themselves as if they were carrying a python.

They're going to get him out, Davis thought. Merni's going to be safe.

Rodriguez was all quiet intensity. As he took up his portion of Merni's burden, he kept thinking he'd forgotten something, something important. But he felt light, incredibly light, as if he were running on a cushion of air. Whatever it was could wait for later.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Merni said in a high moan. "So sorry."

"Hush," said Rodriguez, though his voice was so quiet only he could have heard it. "I'm trying to remember."

The others in front of Davis were out of the vines and onto the path. Davis could see the path, clear of tendrils, ten meters ahead of her. But the shadow was upon her again, and she knew the vines were descending for her.

"Davis!" Farrel was screaming. She and Rodriguez had made it to the edge of the vines with Merni. "Davis, run!"

Hopeless. *To be a rock. To be a rock and let troubles pass over you without notice, without hurt. Sweet rock of ages.* Davis reached into her pocket and brought out the pills she'd stowed there. No time to choose. No time to think. She crammed them *all* into her mouth and swallowed as hard as she could. She must have broken some of the capsules before she'd eaten them, for already she could feel the bugs churning in her gut. What would

happen? Maybe, all together, they would cancel out one another. But no. The change was coming. The change.

"Davis! Oh, God, Davis!" Farrel yelled. Her throat felt like a ragged steam vent. She had to get back as the jungle once again descended.

As Farrel stumbled backward, she saw Davis standing completely still, with a placid smile on her face. After that, Farrel couldn't be sure that her newly reconstituted eyes weren't playing tricks on her.

Davis seemed to fold outward, to erupt—but like a flower, fanning forth—into incandescent colors, shining brightly in purples and reds. Each color-petal began to take its own form, separate from the whole, becoming a tiny, winged creature, dazzling as fireworks. Then the fire-beetles coalesced with a sudden movement, as quick as sparks shot out of a fire—but inward, to a brilliant implosion—forming *something*, something incredible.

Beautiful.

Farrel stared, trying to make her mind process what it was seeing.

But the jungle came down, and Davis was gone.

Farrel sat down, breathing in quick gasps. She felt something move beneath her and started, thinking it was a stray tendril, reaching to get her. But no. She'd shit her pants. She felt her face flush in embarrassment. She stood up and tried to work the stool out one of her pant legs. If I was in the gel, I wouldn't have to worry about this, she thought. And then she started laughing. She couldn't stop for a long time. Nothing had ever been funnier in her whole life. Finally she got hold of herself and looked

around. She better get the others out of the pathway before the jungle made another try for them. But it hadn't been able to reach this far before, and so they were probably out of immediate danger.

"Well," said Farrel, looking around. "How are we?"

Merni was half crouched nearby, looking like a cobra dancing out of a wicker basket. Farrel realized he was twisted so tightly around himself that he couldn't move. Rodriguez still had a grip on one of Merni's arm appendages. He didn't have the ability to let go and Merni obviously didn't have the strength to pull away.

"I think I'm pregnant," the tyke moaned. "The mates will laugh me off the net."

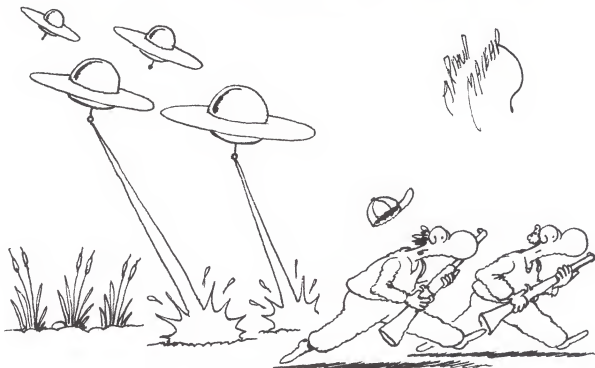
Rodriguez seemed to be in intense concentration. He was staring hard off into space, some variant on sweat dripping from his pallid chin.

"I remember now," said Rodriguez. Farrel started to ask him what it was he remembered, but then realized that she knew the answer to that question already.

Rodriguez let go of Merni and absently wiped the sweat from his face. "Today was the day I was going to die."

Farrel blinked into the milky-white nitrogen sky. She wondered if Dover's atmosphere let the stars come out at night. It didn't really matter. Any light that they could see would be long dead. Ghost light. Somewhere in all that whiteness there would soon be the image of a little girl, bounding through the craters of the Moon, clapping in the sun. Dead for thousands and thousands of years.

"We've still got time, Betabait," she said to Rodriguez. "We've got plenty of time for that." ♦



"I told you that wasn't a skeet!"

Grace and Percy

... oh, and Helen too

Juleen Brantingham

Once upon a time in the fabled land of South Louisiana there lived a King who had one charming daughter. She was so graceful and pretty that she was named Grace, and the King was so fond of her that he had a hard time keeping his mind on ruling his kingdom (he had investments in oil, cotton, cattle, and shrimp boats).

Every day he gave the Princess a lovely new gown that came direct from London or Paris, and when she was hungry she had Godiva chocolates to eat, and when she wanted to go out for some fresh air she had a Porsche to ride in and a fistful of gold cards so she could buy whatever her

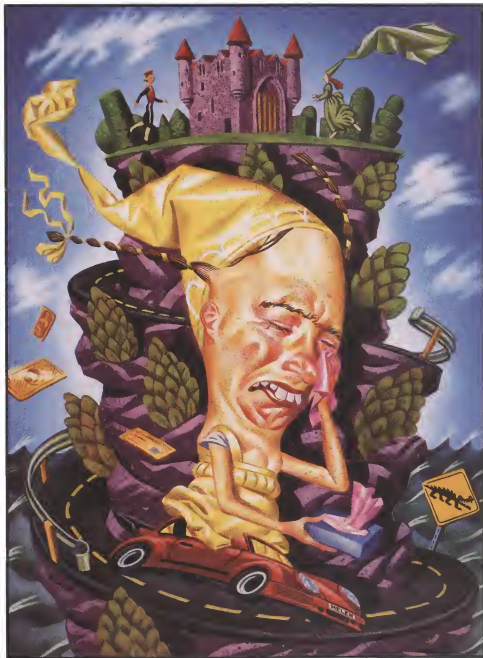


Illustration by Robert Morrissey

little heart desired. Everybody said she was the happiest Princess in the world.

The King had another daughter who was not charming or graceful and as for pretty, *cher*, you've seen mud pies prettier than this girl. Her name was Helen.

The King wasn't fond of Helen but he was as fair as the day is long, so every time he gave Grace a new gown he gave one to Helen, too. The gowns he gave Grace were green, which looked stunning with her red hair and emerald eyes, but a little birdie had whispered in the King's ear that Helen's favorite color was yellow and you can imagine how that looked, with her sallow skin. I guess that little birdie forgot to mention there's not many Princesses who can wear yellow without looking like three-day-old roadkill.

The King gave Helen Godiva chocolates to eat and a Porsche to ride in (though she'd gotten so many speeding tickets he was becoming annoyed) and a fistful of gold cards just like Grace's. But Helen was not happy. She might have all the gowns and chocolates a Princess could ever want, but she didn't have her Daddy's love and she knew it. Princesses always know these things.

The atmosphere around the palace got pretty tense, what with suitors arriving nightly to recite poems for Grace and take her out on dates while Helen had to sit home with only a bag of cheese puffs and the TV for company. Grace was always getting selected Queen of the Hollyhock Festival or Miss Oil Derrick, leaving her crowns and sashes lying all over the palace for Helen to trip over, and nobody chose Helen to be Queen of anything, not even the Turnip Festival, so there was nothing she could do but go speeding off in her Porsche to console herself with another shopping spree.

Finally Helen couldn't take it any more. There wasn't a hope in hell that Grace would wake up one morning with a big fat zit on her nose, so Helen asked the King to send her away to finishing school. The way Helen saw it, any Princess unlucky enough to have a sister like Grace was already finished, to all intents and purposes, but at least it would get her out of the palace, and with any luck she might wind up with a roommate uglier than she was.

Turned out Helen's roommate was so beautiful that her jealous stepsisters had kept her locked up in a tower for most of her life. But that's another story.

With Helen out of the way, Grace made a few changes in the palace. First off she dropped out of high school, saying she was already as smart as any Princess should be, and then she got the King to set back her curfew because it was cutting into her social life, and then she sweet-talked him into letting her move into Helen's old room, which was bigger than hers. (This was just about the only concession the King had ever made to Helen, giving her the bigger room, because after all he *was* as fair as the day is long.) Grace threw out Helen's musty old books and her albums of pressed wildflowers and her CD's of classical music. She redecorated in shades of jade and chartreuse, put up about a dozen mirrors, and surrounded herself with teddy bears and pictures of guitar-playing Princess. When she wasn't out on a date she'd

hole up in her room and play heavy metal music so loud the paint started to flake.

Spring came to South Louisiana; it lasted about a day and a half, as usual, and then it was summer and Grace realized that all the best Princesses in the world have perfect golden tans so she had to have one too. Everybody knows a Princess can't get the perfect tan unless she's lying next to a body of water, preferably in the South of France, but the King got downright irritable when he couldn't drop in on his cronies at the Oilmen's Club every day. Grace knew he'd never go for trading his Louisiana palace for one in France.

Grace went to her Daddy and she charmed and beguiled him, pointing out that Helen's expenses at school were much less than what he used to spend on her gowns and speeding tickets and wouldn't it be totally rad if they had a pool in the back yard so they could take a dip any time they wanted?

Well, the King hemmed and hawed; he said the oil business was going to the dogs and he couldn't get a decent price for his cattle, what with people worrying about cholesterol, and as for cotton—well, he didn't even want to *think* about cotton. You know how Kings get sometimes. But finally he gave in and he called up and ordered the prettiest in-ground pool you ever did see, kidney-shaped, with a fountain at one end and a hot tub off to the side and Grace's name picked out in sea-green tiles on the bottom.

Buying the pool wasn't the end of it, of course. First off the King had to order this special kind of water so Grace's skin wouldn't prune up and get ugly. Then he had to have the back yard landscaped and a bunch of tall, expensive trees planted because Grace wanted the perfect *all-over* tan and her Daddy didn't think the neighborhood Kings and Princes ought to get an eye-ful every time they looked out their back doors. Then the King found out you can't have a pool without throwing the occasional pool party so first there was the catering and then the extra maids that had to be hired to hand around hors d'oeuvres and by this time even the King had to agree that the palace was looking a little shabby so there was the expense of hiring a decorator and buying new furniture and knickknacks. Then there was the pool man who came twice a week to treat the pool so it wouldn't get yucky with black algae and mustard algae, and there was the lawn-care service and, just to be on the safe side, an alarm system and a security service. And it haven't even begun to tell you about the cost of Grace's bathing suits and cunning little cover-ups and the extra visits to the salon she had to make so her hair didn't develop split ends.

I tell you, *cher*, that pool turned out to be one tremendous headache. The King began to long for the days when he only had to worry about gowns and speeding tickets. On top of all that, the oil business got worse and half his shrimping fleet sank in a hurricane and his cattle came down with hoof-and-mouth disease.

Wouldn't you know, with all these extra worries, one day the King just up and dies of a heart attack.

Grace had to be sedated.

When Helen heard the news she got a fit of the shakes and had to sit down and put her head between her knees. Helen really loved her Daddy, even though he didn't love her back, and now there was no chance he'd learn to appreciate her good qualities. She wept buckets, too, and weeping didn't look good on Helen: it made her nose run and her eyes get red and puffy. Uglified as she was, she still had to get herself home for the funeral so she pulled up her socks and blew her nose and made her airline reservation and packed a bag.

When Helen got to the palace she found the maids were checking the numbers on their lottery tickets or talking to their boyfriends on the phone and the cook was reading *People Magazine* and nothing had been done about funeral arrangements, the other relatives hadn't even been notified yet because Grace hadn't finished weeping. Grace wept prettily, of course: her lower lip would tremble and big fat tears would roll down her cheeks but her eyes never turned red or puffy.

Helen notified the relatives and bought the casket and arranged for the music and the flowers. She didn't mind having to do all the work because it kept her from thinking how sad she was. The King had been a good ole boy, in spite of everything, and she was really going to miss having him around.

On the day of the funeral the funeral home sent a carriage to pick up the Princesses. Helen was ready to go, dressed in her mourning gown, which made her look even more sallow and showed up her puffy eyes something terrible, but she searched all over and couldn't find Grace. Finally she thought to look out back and there was her sister, sighing and trailing her fingers in the water, looking beautifully tragic as well as stunning, the way black set off her red hair. The fountain was splashing and the birds were singing and every now and then a tear would roll down Grace's cheek. The scene was enough to soften the heart of an IRS troll.

"Time to go, sis," Helen said, as kindly as she could. Grace's prettiness and charms had blighted Helen's life but she couldn't blame her sister for having gotten the best genes. It wasn't as if she'd asked for them.

"Oh, Helen, he was just the sweetest man. I don't think I—I—"

Just then the air was shattered by a tremendous roar like the sound a dragon makes when it's in a rage. There's not a Princess in the world could have made herself heard over that racket even if she'd developed her voice by practicing hog-calling in her spare time. Grace and Helen threw their arms around each other and looked for the smoke or flames or flapping wings that means there's a dragon coming in for a landing.

But it wasn't a dragon, as you've probably guessed since dragons aren't too common these days, even in the fabled land of South Louisiana. What it was was a lawn-mowing chariot, one of those big jobbies, the kind where the driver stands up on the back and steers it like one of those old-time chariots that had horses to pull them. It was a sight to see, what with chrome wheels and a body of red enamel and orange flames painted on like they were shooting out of the engine.

The Princesses didn't give the chariot a second glance once they saw the charioteer, a hunk if there ever was one. He had curly hair, blue eyes, a devil-may-care grin, and a body to die for; he was stripped to the waist, of course, and had a golden tan slathered all over his pecs and delts or whateverthehell those muscles are called, of which he had an overabundance, just going to waste if you ask me since he wasn't using them for anything more strenuous than steering his chariot. He had on a Walkman and since he was mowing the far end of the yard he didn't see the Princesses standing by the pool.

"Jehosaphat!" Grace murmured when the chariot turned a corner.

"Is that his name?" Helen asked absent-mindedly. Then she recalled what a serious and solemn occasion this was and she put the charioteer out of her mind—it wasn't easy—and she coaxed Grace to come along with her to the King's funeral.

I don't know how they do things in your fabled land but in South Louisiana, right after the funeral all the relatives come back to the palace so they can hold the reading of the will. That way those who have gathered to weep and say how the deceased was the noblest King on earth can find out how the dear deceased had divvied up his bags of gold. When everybody was gathered in the parlor with tea and *oreilles de cochon* to nibble on, Helen decided she could relax, since Daddy was bound to have left the palace and the bags of gold to Grace anyway.

So she just happened to wander out to the back yard where the charioteer was finishing the edging around the pool and purely by accident, of course, she bumped into him. Then she pretended to be all flustered and she gave him a hand getting up the ladder and helped him fish the edger out of the pool—luckily it wasn't electric.

A well-brought-up Princess can't knock somebody into a swimming pool and then just walk away so Helen introduced herself and they got to talking. It turned out this was the charioteer's first day on the job and his name wasn't Jehosaphat but Percy, which was almost as bad in his opinion, but he'd been named for his grandfather and there wasn't much he could do about it except call himself Spike and wear leather and an earring made out of a rattlesnake skull. Helen and Spike were just past the stage of howdy-doing and right up to the stage of maybe-we-could-take-in-a-movie-sometime when one of the maids came running out to tell Helen she'd better get herself to the parlor because Princess Grace was having a hissy-fit.

Telling Spike she'd meet him at the movie theater about seven—you think she wanted him to come calling for her and risk having Grace answer the door, you got to be crazy—Helen went inside to see what the fuss was about.

What it was was the King's will. Seems he'd bent over backwards to be fair, maybe a little too far. He'd figured that long before he was called to make the trip to the Great Beyond, Grace would have gotten herself married to some Prince and she wouldn't have any worries, but Helen, now—if he didn't want to look down from the

Great Beyond some day and find she'd turned into a bag lady, he'd better make certain arrangements. So it was Helen who got the palace and the investments in oil, cotton, cattle, and shrimp boats, which even with the economy the way it was was nothing to sneeze at.

Grace got a few trinkets of sentimental value like her Porsche (which had been in the King's name for insurance reasons), the frocks in her closet and all the Godiva chocolates left in the pantry. Oh, yes, and she got to keep her gold cards for six months but after that she was cut off, *c'est tout*.

I'd have had a hissy-fit, too, wouldn't you?

Well, Helen, you could have knocked her over with a feather. She got a sparkle in her eye and roses in her cheeks, almost looked pretty there for a minute. Money usually does that for a Princess, but with Helen there was more to it. She was thinking that maybe the King had loved her a little bit after all. Being in such a good mood, she put her arms around Grace and said things like "Now, now" and "There, there" and "Do you think I'm going to let my sister suffer just because Daddy got a little careless?" but she stopped herself before offering to put the money in a joint account.

So Grace stopped throwing cookies and screeching fit to bust an eardrum. She hugged Helen back and said she hadn't really been worried, not for a minute.

Things at the palace settled down, as much as they ever can with two Princesses living under the same roof. Helen took over managing the King's investments and came to find out she'd a lot rather deal with cattle barons and cotton kings and shrimp-boat captains than go speeding around in her Porsche and racking up charges on her gold cards.

Now having a career is nice but success is pointless if you can't share it with your true love. Helen thought she had a pretty good prospect in Spike because they had so many interests in common: his muscles and classical music and his smile and wildflowers and his curly hair and going to movies where they could sit in the dark and hold hands. She started dating him on a regular basis, though she had to do it on the sly, meeting him at theaters and restaurants and sending Grace out for a drive whenever it was time to have the lawn mowed.

Well, Helen was no fool; she knew it had to happen one day. On that fatal afternoon Grace was pulling out of the driveway when her Porsche got a flat. Helen ran down there lickety-split and she got out the jack and popped out the hubcap so slick it sailed away like an enchanted Frisbee, when who should drive up but the lawn-mowing crew. Spike dashed over to give Helen a hand but then he saw Grace and he was a gone goose. His knees buckled and his tongue was hanging out and he got so flustered he introduced himself as Percy.

"—uh—that is—my friends call me Spike."

"Oh, but Percy is so *romantic* and it suits you perfectly," Grace said, fluttering her eyelashes, of which she had about a bale and a half.

"Gee, it sounds different when *you* say it."

Helen thought she was going to puke. She stomped down into the palace and slammed the door and fired

two maids and executed a hostile takeover of a drilling-mud, hairspray, and cattle feed outfit before she'd even caught her breath.

Pretty soon Grace came tripping in to say Percy had invited her to go eat crawfish and listen to some zydeco after he finished the lawn but he was a little short of cash and would Helen mind giving her an advance on her allowance?

Helen got a look in her eye that wasn't pretty to see. "Why of course, *cher*," she said. "What are sisters for? But you know, I've been thinking. With the palace being in my name now it seems odd to have your name spelled out on the bottom of the pool. What do you say while I run down to the ATM, you rearrange those tiles so they spell Helen?" Then she took off in her Porsche, cackling like a fiend from hell because she knew Grace, for all the time she'd spent working on her tan, had never dipped a toe in the water and couldn't swim a stroke. Grace went out back and sat down and commenced to weep, because even if she could swim she wouldn't want her hair to get all wet and bedraggled before she went out on a date.

After while Percy came roaring around the corner on his chariot. When he saw the Princess weeping he ran over to ask what was the matter. Grace had to tell him how cruel Helen was, saying she couldn't have any cash unless she did this mean little chore that would take her a week, at least, and mess up her hair into the bargain. Percy kissed her brow and told her not to worry. He asked her to turn around and then he shucked off his jeans and dove into the pool and before you know it, he had those sea-green tiles rearranged so they spelled out Helen.

While he was down there, naked as the day he was born, Grace peeked and when he came up she pretended she hadn't seen anything. I guess that tells you what kind of Princess *she* was.

When Helen saw the tiles had been changed around and Grace's hair wasn't even damp she was a mite put out about it, but she had her Daddy's sense of fairness so she gave Grace the cash. Grace and Percy went off to eat crawfish and listen to zydeco, leaving Helen to nurse a broken heart because she knew she'd never find anyone as nice as Spike.

Next thing you know Percy was dropping in at the palace six nights a week and twice on Sunday and when Helen was the one who answered the doorbell, he walked by like he'd never seen her before. He had a taste for heavy metal music himself, or pretended he did, and he and Grace would sit in the parlor holding hands and watching the paint flake. Or they'd go out to the pool and Helen would have to plug her ears to keep from hearing Percy making show-offy dives and Grace giggling and telling him how wonderful he was.

Helen promised herself that if Grace asked for another advance on her allowance she'd set her a task twice as hard as rearranging a few pool tiles.

One day Percy mentioned he'd like to go and see the LSU football game but the lawn-care service was slow about paying their charioteers and he was temporarily

embarrassed. So Grace offered to buy the tickets and hot dogs, but first she had to ask Helen for another teensy little advance.

"Why of course, *cher*," Helen said. "What are sisters for? But it's just the worst luck you should ask me this week. My Porsche has been running rough, probably the turbocharger again, and you know how backed up they are down at Ye Olde Porsche Repaire Shoppe. I probably won't get it fixed before the end of the football season."

Now Grace was charming and pretty and all that but she couldn't tell a turbocharger from a garlic press and she said to herself, "How hard can it be?" She promised Helen she'd have her Porsche fixed up in a jiff and she picked up a screwdriver—she did know what one of those looked like—and she sallied forth to the palace carport.

It just wasn't Grace's day. Trying to get the hood up, she broke one of her inch-long sculptured nails. She sat down to weep about it and completely lost track of the time. When Percy came by to pick her up, he thought she looked cute as the dickens, waving that screwdriver around, but he said it might take her an hour or more and they really couldn't afford the time if they wanted to get to the game before the kickoff.

"You run upstairs and put on a nice gown and I'll have this turbocharger taken care of in two shakes of a lamb's tail."

He did, too. With nothing more than a screwdriver. Sounds like magic, you say? Well, it turns out Percy was keeping a few secrets because he thought acting mysterious would make the Princess love him more, which just goes to show there's some pretty dim bulbs driving chariots these days.

When Grace told Helen her Porsche was fixed, Helen knew Grace wasn't the responsible party. Do the wizards at NASA ask the pizza-delivery boy to fill in when one of their rocket scientists goes on vacation? But she drove down to the ATM and got some cash and waved goodbye when Grace and Percy went off to cheer the LSU Tigers. To tell the truth, Helen was feeling a teensy bit ashamed of her bad temper.

"Percy just saved me from dropping a bundle down at Ye Olde Porsche Repaire Shoppe," she said to herself. "If Grace can get him to do all our repairs it might even make up for his leaving suntan oil rings around the pool." She was trying real hard to be reasonable, though her heart was broken into a million pieces.

Did you ever know a mechanic who could work on a car without leaving a greasy mess? Percy had slopped a puddle of the stuff on the floor of the carport and when Helen went to get her purse, her foot hit that puddle and she went flying ass over teakettle, giving herself a whack on the head.

"If that sister of mine asks for another nickel I'm going to come up with a task that's ten times harder than fixing a turbocharger."

Boy, was she in a rotten mood.

But maybe you would have been too if Grace ever stole your own true love.

There being nothing iffy about the possibility that Grace would be coming around with her hand out again, Helen sat down and thought about all the horrible and impossible things she might ask her to do. Then she got out the newspaper and looked up something in the entertainment section. The next time Grace asked for an advance, Helen was ready for her.

"Why of course, *cher*. What are sisters for? But you know, I've been thinking. It can't be much fun for you to have to keep asking for money. What do you say we have a little contest? If you win I'll raise your allowance a thousand dollars a week and if I win you tell Percy you've decided to go back to school and you won't have time to go out on dates."

Grace, not being the brightest Princess in the world, said, "That sounds fair. What kind of contest?"

"I thought maybe . . . a dancing contest."

When Grace heard that, her heart sank down to the polished toenails that were peeking cutely out of her sandals. She knew she'd been suckered. The one thing in the world Helen could do better than anybody was dance. Face it, when you're uglier than a mud pie you've got to develop social skills.

"I don't think there's any good bands playing this weekend," Grace said.

But Helen told Grace there was to be a *fais-dodo* that very night and all the best bands in South Louisiana would be there. So the Princesses put on their dancing gowns and set out for the *fais-dodo*. Helen was in such a good mood that she even offered to drive so Grace wouldn't have to buy gas.

At a South Louisiana *fais-dodo* they close off the streets and hang lanterns in the trees and everybody dances all night, from the toddlers who can barely walk without falling down, to the great-grannies and the uncles and the third-cousins-twice-removed. The Cajuns like dancing almost better than they like eating crawfish or cooking up a gumbo. They generally don't quit until the sun's up and it's time to go home and feed the chickens or open up the banks and the video stores.

By the time Grace and Helen got to the *fais-dodo*, the dancing had been going on for some time and the fiddles and the accordions and the triangles were hot from being played so hard. The moon was shining down fit to bust, pleased to have been invited to pass a good time with folks who know how to party better than anybody.

Grace didn't have any trouble finding partners at first but Helen, once she showed what she could do, she put everybody else in the shade. The men left off looking at Grace and lined up to take a turn with Helen.

Poor Grace had bad luck with her partners, like always. As soon as they put their arms around her they'd be so distracted by her womanly charms and the bale and a half worth of eyelashes that she couldn't help fluttering at them that they'd stumble over their own feet. All the while Helen would be jumping and spinning and heel-kicking up and down the street, like she had on a pair of enchanted shoes, wearing out one partner after another. Helen was having a fine time and thinking how she'd catch Percy again after Grace dumped him.

Finally there was a break in the dancing and Helen went to get herself a drink and fan herself with her handkerchief. Grace was as miserable as a Princess could be, telling herself she should have known better than to take Helen up on her offer without asking first what kind of contest it was to be. She liked Percy almost better than any Prince she'd ever dated.

Just as the musicians were picking up their instruments and folks were shaking the kinks out, a hush fell over the street. Out from behind the trees walked this tall dark stranger dressed in black leather, wearing a mask with the eyeholes outlined in rhinestones. The stranger went up to Grace and asked her to dance. Grace was sort of in a daze but she held out her arms and the masked man took her to the middle of the street and they commenced to two-step. They danced like they'd been made for each other; they danced so's their feet hardly seemed to touch the pavement; they danced so well that everybody else backed off to give them room.

Now, the dancers and the musicians, they might not have known who that stranger was but Grace figured it out pretty quick and Helen wasn't much behind her. What Helen said isn't fit to print but what Grace said as the music was coming to an end was, "Oh, Percy, how did you know I was here? How did you know I needed a dancing partner?"

Percy kissed the tips of her fingers. "My darling, my love for you is so strong that my heart hears your softest whisper. I will always know how to find you when you need me."

Then with a bow, he disappeared whence he came, behind the trees.

After that demonstration of terpsichorean artistry, there was no question about which Princess had won the contest. Even the other dancers felt the fun had gone out of the evening so the musicians packed up their instruments and the dancers said their goodnights and gathered up their children and before you know it, the *fais-dodo* was over. The only ones left were Grace, who had stars in her eyes, and Helen, who was fit to chew concrete and spit nails.

"Ready to go?" Grace asked, not noticing how upset Helen was.

"I hope you don't mind," Helen said. "I have to make a little stop on the way. Won't take more than a minute."

"Why should I mind?" Grace asked.

She should have minded.

The two Princesses climbed into the Porsche and Helen started it up and Grace was so thrilled that Percy had showed up to help her win the contest that she didn't notice Helen was taking the long way home. That is, the *loong* way home. Like out over the Atchafalaya. Finally Helen parked at the side of the road and turned off the lights and it was so dark Grace couldn't see her hand in front of her face. I guess the moon had gone home to bed like everybody else.

"I've got the *envie* to have me some duck eggs for breakfast and I know a place where the nests are thick as fleas on a hound. You hold my hand and I'll take you there."

They picked their way down a muddy slope and Grace could hear water splashing and then Helen was telling her to get into this rowboat. Grace tried to beg off, being worried that her dancing gown might get water-spotted.

"To tell the truth, *cher*, I don't feel much like a boat ride tonight. Maybe I'll just wait in the car."

"Look out! There's a water moccasin behind you!"

So Grace jumped into the rowboat.

Helen got in the other end and picked up the oars and she rowed and she rowed and her temper was starting to cool down some but not enough. Grace was getting a wee bit suspicious. It was darker than the inside of your pocket at the bottom of a coal mine but a swamp smells like a swamp and she could hear owls hooting; she had a pretty good idea Helen wasn't taking her to the mall to go shopping.

Finally the rowboat bumped up against something and Grace was so thankful Helen hadn't knocked her out of the boat to drown that she hopped out before she'd studied the situation. Helen, who had excellent night vision, thought this might be as good a place as any.

"You sure you want to wait here?" she asked, sweet as pie. "Those duck nests are just the next island over, or maybe the one after that. It won't take but a minute."

When Grace got out of the rowboat she happened to light on the only dry spot on an island the size of a handkerchief, but first step she took, her foot went into mud up to her ankle and on the second step, the mud was up to her knees. She was so busy saying cute things like *ooh* and *icky* and wishing she'd worn high-top waders that Helen was almost out of earshot before Grace realized she'd made a mistake.

"Helen, do you know if there's a phone nearby? I think I'd like to send out for a pizza while I'm waiting."

"This is the Atchafalaya, *cher*. I don't think the gators have much use for phones but you might ask the next one that comes along."

Thinking of the gators the Atchafalaya is famous for made Grace forget her other worries and she shouted for Helen to come back, not even caring that Helen would probably laugh at her, but by then Helen was so far away she couldn't hear.

Dark as it was, the gators could see just fine and they were surprised to spy this dainty morsel drop into their neighborhood. It so happened that red hair was their favorite color for a midnight snack. They plopped into the water, making for the island Grace was stuck on, arguing at the tops of their lungs about who was getting the drumsticks and who would have to settle for the neck.

Now, Helen had only rowed some little ways off thinking she'd rest for a minute and give Grace time to get good and scared and then she'd go back and pick her up. But she was laughing so hard she lost her grip on the oars and they floated away.

"This is a fine pickle," she said to herself. Then she shivered. Thinking of pickles reminded her of food and food reminded her of gators and gators reminded her of where she'd left Grace. She thought about the cute way Grace's nose wrinkled up when she laughed and that reminded her of the jokes they'd laughed at together and

the times Grace had turned down a date just so she could stay home and share a bag of cheese puffs and watch TV with her. Helen got to thinking that she'd a lot rather lose a dozen Percys than her one and only sister so she started paddling with her hands and if you think that's easy, *cher*, you ought to try it, especially in the Atchafalaya, thick with gators and other things you wouldn't invite home to dinner, not even if they was to be the main course.

Away off on that little bit of an island, Grace heard the gators coming and she began to weep because she was never again going to live in a palace or drive a Porsche or get to wear pretty gowns and go to a *fais-dodo*. Kind of as an afterthought she remembered Percy.

"Oh, Percy, I just wish I could have told you that you were my one true love."

Suddenly, she saw a blue flash and Percy popped out of thin air. It had never occurred to Grace that a man who could fix a Porsche turbocharger with only a screwdriver had to be a wizard and it didn't occur to her then, either, but him stepping out of thin air like that made her suspect he might be something more than your ordinary lawn-mowing charioteer. The fact that he was a wizard was one of those secrets I told you he was keeping and he'd only taken a job with the lawn-care service because it would get him out in the sunshine and fresh air, wizards' laboratories being such dark, stinky places.

With a wave of his hand Percy made those gators back off and then he took Grace in his arms and kissed her. Grace returned his kisses and swore she'd love him forever. Forever being until Tuesday after next, which is usually as far ahead as a Princess can make plans.

With a whistle Percy summoned up a pirogue drawn by six snow-white gators and he and the Princess stepped into it and the gators whisked them away over swamp and bayou until they came to a palace made out of crystal. Inside there was a fire burning in the fireplace and a table as long as a Cadillac had been set out and covered with dainty dishes to tempt the appetite of a Princess. Grace and Percy were merry, eating and drinking and listening to heavy metal music, but at low volume so as not to shatter the crystal walls.

It was a lovely evening, the kind a Princess likes to remember when she's old and gray, but the instant Grace woke up the next morning it occurred to her that even if a lawn-mowing charioteer did have a flying carpet so he could follow her to the middle of the Atchafalaya, he could never afford a crystal palace. The longer she thought about it, the more worried she got. Most likely the palace and the crystal fireplace and the table as long as a Cadillac belonged to some King who was away on vacation and if that was true, Percy had no right to be here, let alone entertain a guest, so she'd better get out before the rightful owner came back and called the cops.

Percy was lounging around by the front door when Grace tried to get away and he asked where she was going in such a hurry. Grace said she had to get home because Helen was still grieving for the King and there was no telling what she might do, rattling around in the palace all by herself. Percy begged her to remember how

cruel Helen had been to her. He said that if she would marry him the crystal palace would be hers and his one thought for the rest of his life would be to make her happy.

Grace had had suitors promise her everything from the moon to her very own Swiss Alp. She knew what those promises were worth. But being a properly brought-up Princess she didn't want to get nasty about it.

"Oh, no, I dare not stay," she said. "It will break my heart to leave but I must go home and see poor Helen."

"There's an easier way to do that," Percy said.

Now you can imagine what Helen had thought the night before when she got back to the island and saw a bunch of salivating gators and no Grace. It was bad enough to have lost her Daddy but to lose her sister, too, sounded like plain carelessness. So she went back to the palace and chewed her fingernails and tried to figure out what to do. She'd finally come up with a plan and believe me, *cher*, it wouldn't have worked for anybody but a Princess with bags and bags of gold.

Back at the crystal palace, Percy led Grace to the top of a high tower and he took her hand and made her put the tip of her little finger in her mouth and look towards the town. There Grace saw Helen dress up a log of wood in Grace's favorite gown and tie red yarn on top of it to look like hair. She called in an old, half-blind doctor and had him put his stethoscope to that log of wood and certify that there wasn't any heartbeat. Then she went and told the maids and the lawyers that Grace had danced too hard at the *fais-dodo* and she'd died of a heart attack, just like their Daddy.

Helen put that log of wood in a casket and they held the funeral and all the maids wept and Grace's former suitors carried on as if their hearts were broken and Helen didn't look too good herself.

When Grace saw how sad everybody was, she felt she just had to rush home. So she said to Percy, "Oh, if you love me, let me go." She'd heard that line once in a country-western song and thought it sounded pretty good.

Even though Percy didn't want to, he had to let her go, but he had the satisfaction of having the last word.

"Princess, I fear you do not love me well enough. I foresee that you will come to regret leaving the crystal palace where we have been so happy."

He led Grace outside and whistled up the pirogue. Halfway down the bayou Grace heard a tremendous crash and when she looked back she saw the crystal palace had shattered itself into a million splinters and disappeared. There was no sign of Percy. Grace wiped away a tear but thought it was probably all for the best because now when the rightful owner returned there wouldn't be any fingerprints and Percy wouldn't be thrown in jail.

When the pirogue left her off in front of her palace, Grace ran inside to spread the good news. She found Helen in her bedroom tearing down the posters of the guitar-playing Princes.

"Oh, dear sister, weep no more! I was saved from the gators and I have returned to you!"

Now Helen really was glad to have her sister back. She'd been up most of the night thinking how she could do things different if only she had the chance and here she had the chance only she hadn't had time to get ready.

"Nice to see you," she said, kind of wan and weary. Maybe Helen's tone was less than enthusiastic and maybe Grace was still a mite suspicious about having been dropped off in the swamp, but anyway Grace got kind of cranky about it and she flopped down on the bed and pouted.

"You're just saying that. I'll bet you wish those gators had eaten me after all."

Helen had to do something to convince her and even though she hadn't had time to get ready, she thought she might still be able to carry it off, what with Grace not being the brightest Princess in the world.

"Now that's not true, *cher*. It's just that I'm so distracted, what with having the funeral this morning and then coming back to the palace to find a good fairy waiting for me with the most amazing news."

"A fairy?" Grace asked suspiciously. "What news?"

"Well, it seems Daddy was playing a joke when he pretended he was only leaving you trinkets. The fairy said the King hid a great treasure out in the back yard. It's probably under that big rock. We'll hire some men to dig out the rock and we'll get your treasure and then you'll be as wealthy as I."

I guess I don't need to tell you that the King hadn't left any treasure hidden away. Helen thought that while Grace was taking a bath or doing her nails, she'd duck out back and slip a bag of gold and the deeds to a couple of oil wells under the rock and Grace would never know the difference.

But Grace, once her suspicions were aroused, couldn't be satisfied unless they got the treasure right away. So Helen followed her out back, planning that when they found nothing under the rock she'd say the fairy must have got confused and she'd have time to think of some other hiding place.

It was a struggle but finally they got the rock lifted up and then, leaving Helen to balance it as best she could, Grace ran over to look for her treasure.

"Why, I don't see anything here but a deep, black hole," she said.

Helen couldn't say anything because she was fighting to keep that rock from falling down.

"Tell the truth," Grace said in her nastiest voice. "You sneaked out here and stole my treasure."

Helen couldn't say anything because she was trying so hard to keep that rock from falling. Just then the dirt crumbled under Grace's feet and she fell down into the hole. Then the rock slipped out of Helen's hands and slammed down on top of her.

"Well, if that don't beat all," Helen said, feeling real sorry for herself. "I don't have her back for more than two minutes when I go and lose her again."

At least she wouldn't have to hold another funeral for Grace, seeing as how she'd already been buried twice.

The hole Grace had fallen into was the deepest hole

in the world. In the time it took her to reach the bottom she could have had her hair done and her nails sculpted and her tires rotated. Finally she landed, but softly, as if the bottom was piled with feathers. She almost thought it would have been better if she'd been shattered to bits because she was so far down she'd never be able to climb out. Not even Percy, not even if he had a magic carpet, would be able to find her.

"Oh, Percy, you were right," she said, weeping. "If only you knew how I am suffering for my mistake. If only you could help me now!"

Scarcely had she finished speaking before a little door opened up and sunshine blazed into that dismal hole. Grace didn't hesitate but stepped through the door.

Meanwhile, back at the palace, Helen had had second thoughts about leaving matters as they were. She had to try to get Grace back, even if it was hopeless, even if she had to be buried all over again. So she called to the maids and had them bring her miles and miles of rope and a spelunker's hat with a light on it and crampons and a shovel and a first aid kit and a sack lunch; and then she started climbing down the rope.

When Grace went through the door she found herself in a charming garden where flowers grew on every side, fountains plashed, and birds sang in the trees. She turned to look behind her and there was the crystal palace, with not a single crack to show it had once been shattered.

And coming to meet her was Percy.

Her joy knew no bounds.

By this time even Grace had figured out that there was more to Percy than muscles and a tan and a flying carpet. He must be a Prince at the very least, she thought, and maybe the palace did belong to him. So she threw herself into his arms, saying, "Oh, Percy, I love you truly and forever and I will marry you."

Then she noticed Percy was holding her like she was his least favorite aunt and when she drew back she saw a strange, cold look on his face.

"Whatever is the matter, my love?" she asked.

"You have never loved me for myself but only for what I can do for you," he said.

You have to remember Grace had been through quite an ordeal in the past couple of days: after being menaced by gators and saved by magic, she'd watched her own funeral, fallen down a hole, and been saved by magic again. Though it didn't come natural to her, all she could think to do was be totally frank.

"Well, a Princess has to think about her future. We study our whole lives how to be Princesses. I wouldn't have the least idea how to be anything else. Does that mean we can't be happy?"

"It does," Percy said. And he turned and walked away.

Grace sat down to weep. It had always worked before. This time Percy paid no attention.

Just then Percy and Grace heard a terrible banging and clattering and that little door popped open and out crawled an evil-looking witch with one glaring yellow eye in the middle of her forehead, hair matted with dirt, a red face, and mustard smeared on her nose. It only took Grace a minute or two to figure out it was Helen,

come to rescue her, and she ran over and threw her arms around her sister.

Percy was right behind her and he started giving Helen this big song and dance about how Grace had enchanted him so it was like Helen was invisible and he couldn't remember her name, but now the enchantment was broken and he knew she was his own true love.

"Can it, you musclebound twit," Helen said.

The Princesses were hugging and weeping and each one was saying how sorry she was and how they should never again let some man come between them and wouldn't it be fun to pick up some cheese puffs on the way home and watch movies on TV.

"But only until ten o'clock," Helen said. "Then you've got to get to bed because you've got school tomorrow."

Grace wasn't thrilled with that idea but then Helen started talking about how she was going to have to help manage the King's investments and that sounded like so much fun it would almost be worth it, and considering all that had happened to her, maybe she wasn't already as smart as any Princess should be.

So the Princesses asked Percy if they could borrow his pirogue, not having a fancy to climb back up that

rope, and they started walking toward the bayou when they realized Percy was still standing there, looking a mite confused.

"Is it my breath?" he asked. "Do I have dandruff? Do you hate my earring? I did all the things it says to do in the How to Win a Princess books. So I got a little cranky there at the end. Is my whole life going to be ruined for that one little mistake?"

Grace and Helen looked at each other and nodded. Percy was right. It wasn't really his fault.

"Helen, do you still have your roommate's phone number?" Grace asked.

"You mean the Princess who's so beautiful that her jealous stepsisters kept her locked up in a tower for sixteen years?"

"She and Percy would make a cute couple, don't you think?"

Percy began to smile. It looked like he might win a Princess after all and live happily ever after.

You've heard about the toad who was really an enchanted Prince? Turns out this Princess was really an enchanted toad.

But that's another story. ♦

About the Authors

When **Elisabeth Vonarburg** discovered that we were publishing an essay about her novels ("New Threads in the Tapestry" by Pamela Sargent, in the November 1992 issue), it occurred to her that we might also like to publish one of her short stories. And she was right. "The Knot," this month's lead story, marks the first publication of one of her short works in this country. Other stories of hers have appeared in English in the Canadian magazine *Tesseracts*, and she has a long bibliography of stories and novels published in French.

About this story, Elisabeth says, "The theme of parallel or alternate universes is one that fascinates me—in a way, I think it is *the* SF theme, since the fundamental SF question is 'What if it were different?'"

Tony Daniel's name turns up in a couple of places in this issue—first and foremost at the front of "Dover Beach," his second story for us, and also in the "Tomorrow's Books" feature, where you'll see a listing for his first novel, *Warpath*, scheduled as an April release from Tor Books. Tony's earlier story, "The Natural

Hack," appeared in these pages exactly a year ago.

It's been much longer than a year since the last time we presented a story by **Juleen Brantingham**, but we think you'll agree that "Grace and Percy" was worth waiting for. Juleen's only other "amazing" story is "Lonely Roads," from the July 1986 issue. You'll be hearing from her again soon, since we have another story from her that'll be in print two or three issues from now.

Watch the news for this upcoming event: **Arlan Andrews** says that the Delta Clipper, which serves as the setting for his latest story, "A Little Waltz Music," will be a real spaceship someday; in fact, a test of a 40-foot-tall scale model is scheduled to take place at White Sands in April. The craft will be launched, and, if all goes well, will land vertically (nose up, we presume).

In the last several months, **Barry B. Longyear** has become an AMAZING® Stories regular—a situation that we'll do our best to nurture in the months to come. "Old Soldiers Never Die" is

his fourth story for us in the last ten issues—also his shortest, but no less powerful because of that.

We ran out of fresh biographical information about **Phil Jennings** six or seven stories ago, so this time around he suggested that we take a different tack. "Wouldn't it be wonderful," Phil writes, "if you could write a paragraph that would make the right woman fall in love with me? She'd be half-civilized, sane, sexy, intelligent and overweight, and she'd let *me* be all those things, too."

Okay, Phil, at the risk of turning this feature into a Personals column, we'll write that paragraph. Come to think of it, you just did.

J. R. Dunn has had more of his short stories published in *Omnifan* than any other single publication, but we're pleased to say that this magazine is in second place and gaining. "Men of Good Will" is his third story for us, only six months after "Broken Highway" came out in last October's issue, and we're already looking forward to number four. ♦

A Little Waltz Music



Arlan Andrews, Sr.

Dawn broke hard that morning over Spaceport White Sands. Captain Tina Minella felt it painfully in her throbbing head, testimony to the glare of intense solar radiation fairly roaring across the desert. I always wondered what Kipling meant, she thought, but this ain't even "China 'crost the bay." You could call it "Spaceport 'crost the Sands," I guess. She squeezed her eyes shut against the unwelcome disc of the rising sun and fumbled in her flight suit for a pair of Easeyes. Instantly, welcome darkness eased the pain. Thinking of the day's plans, she yawned and walked into the space terminal and down a wide corridor toward the escalators that would take her to the roof observation platform.

Minella grimaced at the increasing noise as she passed the doorway that opened to the check-in desk. "I don't care what the freakin' doctor says, ma'am," a tall, elderly man was screaming, in a voice that did justice to old-fashioned chalk skidding on an ancient blackboard. "I've paid my god-damn fare, and I'm by God gonna fly in that freakin' thing out there, it's the last thing I do! Don't you know Who The Hell I Am?" She could see the

Illustration by Scott Rosema

Capital Letters hanging in the air as he yelled those last words. When she finally saw the man's outmoded palm companel dangling from a last-century bush jacket, Minella chuckled aloud. I know who you are, Sir. I've agreed with just about every opinion you ever wrote. Except for your preference in computers. The old guy had never taken to neuro-probe complaints, and literally would never know what he was missing.

But world famous or not, she did hope he would quiet down; he might spook the other folks, and that was one thing she did not need. She would take up quite a distinguished load today, and in a small way, it would even be an historic flight of sorts. Not often did she have civilians other than scientists or government types aboard a Clipper flight, and she'd never flown a load of civilians only. No one had. There weren't all that many people who had ever flown to space this way.

As paying tourists. The very first full load of them.

Minella stepped onto an escalator and made her way up to the open rooftop observation tower to check the weather. The cool breeze sweeping up from the desert floor helped clear her head. She glanced at her armpanel with a sigh; any variance from acceptable physiological parameters and the ship wouldn't even let her sit down at the controls. There should be plenty of time, though, to recuperate; the hangover-curing smartpills she'd taken half an hour before should be kicking in any time now.

"Damn, Captain, ma'am, but you look like hell." The voice came from directly in front of her. Eyes still adjusting to the autoshades, she squinted to make out the shape and face of a tall, lanky man, one quite attractive in a craggy sort of way: Leo Ecklin, her copilot for today's orbital trip. He was incongruously dressed in khaki pants and a dark brown bomber jacket, complete with flowing white scarf. A real pilot, she thought sarcastically. But for some reason, he was especially good-looking today.

"So, Leo, you never party?" He was a close friend, no more, a sometime contract copilot who worked the Sands flying Delta Clippers, when he wasn't running cattle between his two large ranches in New Mexico and the state of West Texas. Funny, it was nearly five years since they'd met and she never had asked how a cowboy came to be a rocket jockey. Or was it the other way around?

"Ready to fly up your partying people, Cap'n?" her rocket-flying cowboy asked.

She nodded. "I guess so, Leo. I just hope they get calmed down. They were quite a handful last night." Minella discreetly omitted mention of the passes she'd fended off. Some men, she recalled, shaking her head. And some women!

Ecklin pointed toward the eastern mountains, some twenty miles away. Clouds diffracted the rising sun, dissipating the serape bands of sky into a diffuse amber curtain. "Check the horizon, Tina. Could be rain, over the the Lincoln Forest."

"Hope not," she mumbled. Her attention was drawn to three titanic shapes being towed by small trucks from silolike hangars toward their launch pads, one pad in

each corner of a two-kilometer square that diverged from their observation site. Silhouetted against the brightening sky, they were towering, tapered cylinders, inverted, something a giant child might have made by squashing sixty-meter ice cream cones until they bulged at the bottom. These were DC-3s, "Delta Clippers," the workhorses of space.

Two of them this morning were standard cargo flights, the armpanel display said, going to God knows where, some orbital factory or laboratory. NipponSpace, she imagined, and whatever the hell it was that High Hong Kong was building out to Clarke-Pierce. The bold white color of the middle ship made it stand out from the rest.

"The *Daniel Graham*?" Ecklin asked, pointing.

"The Gen'ral Hissel," she nodded. She'd been very proud, once, to take that ship's namesake up for his transfer to a lunar shuttle. His last words to her had been, "Say goodbye to my friends on Earth." The memory, as always, brought a sad smile.

"And I know the *Jess Sponable*, there," Ecklin indicated a bright blue Clipper at their right. "Flew him to High Hong Kong many times, the last couple of years." She nodded; these ships were fairly new, some of the large, second-generation craft. As one of the first Clipper pilots years back, she'd often flown the smaller vehicles of the very first fleet of DC-2's, the venerable *Max Hunter* and the vintage *Bill Gaubatz*. They'd recently been sold, used, to some of the Asian Tigers—Vancouver and Alaskiberia, she recalled.

But for today, the third one, the giant slumped cone to her left, was hers. For the historic flight.

She stroked her armpanel to display the DC's parameters. To her surprise, she'd drawn a chartered ship named after a woman, something unusual, though not unheard of. That meant they'd have to use the feminine pronoun today. A quick glance at the ship's registry explained the name, if not the naming. Minella shrugged. An eccentric billionaire wants to name his privately owned DC after his aging wife, it's no matter of mine. The charter service leases whatever ship's available; I just fly the damn things. "Well, Leo, you prepared to make a little history today, carry a bunch of creatives on orbit?"

"I dunno, Tina. I'd just as soon carry cargo modules. They slide right into place, don't move much if you're lucky. And"—a long, knobby finger pointed toward the noisy lounge downstairs—"they're one hell of a lot quieter."

Thirty minutes from launch, Minella and Ecklin sat in the crew module, reviewing the day's schedule. "Eight engines, straight up and over to two hundred clicks, the comp'll control the injection trajectory after that, till full fire—all fourteen engines, plus a couple of boosters to keep the rattle and roll down for the paying passengers—and we coast on in a three-hundred by three-fifty klick LEO"—she smiled at the acronym. Was her co capable of putting her in personal orbit, even Low-Earth?"—up and around three orbits, four point eight hours total elapsed time. We land back here at outrigger pad nine, in the Refurb Area."

Ecklin tipped an imaginary cowboy hat. "You make it sound so simple, Cap'n Tina, ma'am." Minella hoped he was right; simple was correct, simple meant you kept on living. Even in the days of routine orbital flight, surprises often meant death.

"It better be routine, Leo," she replied. "Can't have any problems today. This tourist thing develops, we'll have lots of work from now on out."

"Druther drive cows," Ecklin groused half-seriously. "They got no pretensions."

Packing the fifty paying "human cargo units" into place hadn't been any sweat for the pilot and copilot. To the flyers' wide-eyed surprise, as they viewed the passenger compartment on the displate, the tour company provided honest-to-god flight attendants who apparently were taking unusual delight in coddling their somewhat motley array of human beings, arranging their charges in swaddling blankets, adjusting their straps, softly explaining the three-G environment they would soon experience as well as the weightlessness upon achieving orbit.

The cowboy spacejock was aghast. "I'll bet they tuck them in, kiss them goodnight, and wipe their asses, too."

Minella said nothing. The ampanel trip description mentioned a "direct-optical viewing modification" to the familiar semicircular cargo deck to accommodate the new passenger compartment, changes allowing the guests "to experience the full glory of Outer Space holistically", whatever the hell that meant, and didn't "Outer Space" mean out past the Belt somewhere? Who knows?

She'd met many of the guests last night at an agents' and publishers' party in Las Cruces. They were mostly fiction creatives—cyberbookers, netjox, holopros, fixed-media speculaters, even some old spec-phi paper-book writers. She shrugged at that category. What the hell; dispages weren't for everybody. Some people—her mother, for one—didn't like the idea of a book with video pages that you downloaded from the networks. Herself, she'd been an early advocate. One book in one pocket, then you call up whatever text you want. You get the heft and feel of a quality hypertext product, you still get pages to flip, no microviewers, no damn bookshelves!

In its original design concept, the Delta Clipper crew module was separate from the cargo module, simply a wedge-shaped sealed box that plugged into the circular cross-section of the ship. In actual fact, the crew module was optional; need people up there? Plug them and their life support systems as one standard module into a wedge-shaped section, and fly. Don't need people to go along? Fine, the pilot and the co stay in an identical module at the launch site complex and fly the ship that way.

The ship doesn't know the difference, and except for the accelerations and gravity changes, neither does the crew. Their "viewports" are virtual vision, provided by *verb* goggles. "It's always clear skies, just like you'd see if you had microwave radar eyes. Rose-tinted, even, if you want," they said in flight school.

Want a real window to look out? Well, S.O.L., T.S.,

and no way, baby. Insurance companies, though they love the Clipper ships and give them good rates, don't let *no* unshielded radiation through. Cargo might not like it, extra cargo module shielding would have to be carried, cut down the weight on orbit, cut the profits. Incidentally, windows could screw up the thermal protection system that made the ship survive re-entry without the old-fashioned ablation systems that threw away mass you'd already lugged into space. Oh, yeah, and by the way, too, a solar flare just might dose any humans with fatal radiation, you put in a window.

Uncomfortably, she still wondered just what the hell that "direct-optical-viewing modification" was on the passenger deck and wished there were time to call up the drawings and check it out. But Leo interrupted her thought with another checklist item, and she suppressed the discomfort with a shrug. Nothing unsafe would be allowed; the underwriters always saw to that. Anyway, it was just minutes to launch.

"... four ... three ... two ... one. Liftoff!" Spaceport Control yelled over the intercom. Minella winced at the theatrics; there hadn't been public-address countdowns for years, everything was computerized and displayed quietly. Do the airliners have to do this kind of crap? Another sop to the paying guests, she guessed. Space flight's not interesting enough without the drama of the old days. She wondered what all these people would do when they were on orbit, without duties of any kind to fill their time.

The launch, as promised, was routine. A veteran of a hundred or so orbital flights, Minella nevertheless would sweat every millisecond until her craft was delivered to the point she'd contracted for, monitoring each flight parameter, staying aware of engine conditions, fuel levels, exhaust temperatures, wind and shear values, hull conditions. Flying by *verb* controls almost made you feel you were part of the ship, but her perspiration was actual. At her right, Ecklin performed his work in silence and with professional calm as millions of pounds of mass thundered through the sky. She wondered, idly, how his sweat would taste.

Seconds passed; their flight trajectory was already taking them over West Texas, as the Clipper's engine spewed out tons of water vapor in a tremendous condensation trail. Too bad we drop all this freebie water on the West Texans, when New Mexico needs all it can get. She smiled to remember the original arguments¹ against the dangers of inland launches, and the typical New Mexican rejoinders that West Texas should be happy it was only water vapor, not solid stages, that would fall on their new state. Not that New Mexicans would have minded the other method. But now it was all fairly routine.

This time, though, unlike with Leo's preferred cargo modules, the passengers were *not* routine. As part of the Captain's survey of the ship and cargo during the flight, she monitored the peanut gallery, down below. When the Clipper lit off and the G's continued to pile on, there was lots of whooping and crying among the paying

guests. She yelled out to Leo over the noise, "What the hell's going on down there?"

Her copilot shrugged. "If they're hurting, it's a little damn late to find out now!" Aborting the mission, though well within the capabilities of their single-stage Clipper, would cost the charter company a bundle, maybe cost the pilots their jobs. This batch is going up even if it kills them! Minella decided as Mother Nature's complaining G's hunkered harder on her chest.

"Gotta be the excitement, then." Had she herself ever been so emotional, even on the first flight? No, she remembered, she'd been trying to qualify for a high-paying, high-skills job, and a professional didn't act silly, not even on their first trip on orbit. Most of this crowd hadn't put on their *verb* goggles for the trip up, which she thought was stupid. So what's to watch, the walls? It took her some seconds to realize that many of the old-timers were watching *each other*, some stretching their mouths and facial muscles back grotesquely, apparently a parody of something. She didn't understand these people at all. Oh well, at least it didn't affect her ship.

Some people, these creatives!

More whooping and hollering went on when final burn ended and they coasted into orbit. "This is the captain speaking," Minella said over the intercom. "We have achieved our scheduled orbit. You may move about the cabin at will. Attendants, please see to your charges."

"What the hell was that, Cap'n?" Ecklin asked.

She pointed at the ampanel display. "My script, Leo. What they told me to say. Surely you don't think I'm going to be a spaceliner pilot without knowing my lines?"

The cowjock just shook his head.

In this iteration of the Clipper design, as the captain had discovered in her ampanel display during the preflight checkout, a tubular crawlspace allowed the crew entry to the newly installed passenger compartment, a ten-meter trip around the periphery of the ship and over to one wall of the cargo deck. She was grateful that it would be strictly one-way, according to international space regs. All she'd need would be tourists coming in to see the crew module. Would they be disappointed! Minella wriggled through the constrictive tube and pulled herself out into the large volume, there to visit with some of the human cargo units that were paying her salary.

As she emerged, a cheer went up from the forty-nine passengers and eight attendants. Buoyed by the welcome, Minella pulled herself upright and turned to express her gratitude. But all she saw were fifty-seven backs and butts, arranged like random blades of grass, sprouting in every direction from the floor and ceiling, footholds and handholds all over the place. They were looking the other way, the cheers dying down to *oohs* and *aahs*. What the hell was going on? She pushed off to grab a handhold on the ceiling, elbowing her way to the front. She nearly fainted when she saw what they were cheering for.

There, taking up the entire height of floor to ceiling, some five meters high, and a full half of the perimeter of

the Clipper—fifteen meters, one hundred and eighty by God *degrees*!—blossomed a view of space even Minella had never seen. A wide-angle Earth, blue and brown caressed by gossamer wisps of ivory clouds, the backdrop an enormous black space so deep it threatened to suck her soul out of her body into its velvet depths. The sight took her breath away, made her heart pound so loud, it suppressed the scream that threatened to rise to her mouth.

A beautiful, awesome, wraparound, totally transparent, goddamn *window*!

Minella meditated a moment to control her heartbeat and her temper, then dived toward the ranking passenger attendant, pulling her over to the furthest corner behind the ogling tourists. "What the hell is a freakin' *window* doing in my ship?" she whispered as loudly and as commandingly as she could do in a whisper. "Why wasn't I told, and, ex-freakin'-specially, what the hell is it made of?"

The uniformed woman shrugged. "Touch me one more time and you'll be de-ranked, *Captain* Minella. World Code says I don't have to endure no body contact, nor rude gestures, nor person-debilitating verbals.

"Besides that, I don't know anything about the window. I just do what my ampanel program requires." She sniffed. "You don't like it, you tell the charter company. Now, I declare my personal space being infringed. I start recording in two seconds."

Defeated, Minella pushed off, steaming at the stupidity of the "Invasion of Personal Space" ordinances adopted by the emerging global government. How could you control some idiots *without* hurting their freakin' feelings? Why the hell is it, she thought with a sigh, we progress so far in technology and scientific capability, but we never improve the freakin' social technology? God, if only we could get to another planet and keep the vacuum-heads and the barristers from polluting it with their genes . . .

A quick meditation cooled her off enough to be civil again. She decided to inspect The Window, and called up the ship design package on her ampanel display. Sure enough, it was an actual direct-view system, fabricated from a new kind of vacuum-gel glass grown and sold by the sheet in one of the Alaskiberian orbital factories. Flight tested, radiation-proof, IAF certified as safe as the carbon nanomatrix thermal protection material that covered the rest of the ship. For additional safety, there indeed was a secondary thermal protection cover across the glass for takeoff and re-entry. Mentally, Minella kicked herself for not fully checking the "passenger compartment modifications" that had promised "holistic Outer Space" and "direct-optical viewing." It had been pretty plain language; she hadn't been attentive enough. Oh well, it didn't really matter; the captain didn't have to know every technical detail—these weren't the ancient "astronaut" days, when you needed a Ph.-freakin'-D. to ride in a tin can.

Then again, she should've known the insurance companies wouldn't let an untried technology fly, not with

tons of paying human meat aboard. She'd missed this particular development in the tech media updates. She'd been on a week's rec-and-wreck in La Habana, and hadn't kept up. Technology was progressing so fast that major improvements happened almost overnight; eventually, each flight would be a whole new experience. The modification of this ship had been touted on all the techno-*verb* channels last week, and it had been installed in the Clipper just days before. So this is what's it's like to live in a society where technology changes weekly, she thought. What would it be like when change was hourly, continuous? It was a sobering prospect.

Calm and relieved, she floated idly by a collected gaggle of older men, and it registered with her that none of them had been the drunken grabbers of the night before.

"Hello, Captain Minella," one said, offering her a polite hand, by way of an invitation to stop. She smiled and their hands docked, and she quickly found a veleroed landing spot. Her host introduced himself and his companions. One or two of the names she recognized from her spec-phi reading; another was one of the Clipper pioneer developers, she believed. She nodded knowingly at the bush-jacketed man, who returned her smile, but who kept glancing around the room.

"Is there a Way Outside, Captain, Ma'am?" he asked. In capital letters, Minella noticed again.

"That is a surprise question, Doctor. We've no provisions for going outside." That I know of, she thought, remembering The Window. "Isn't the view from inside here good enough?" The writer mumbled something and floated off toward another group, immediately button-holing a small man. Minella frowned.

A stocky, white-bearded man shook his head. "Don't mind Jerry, Captain; he's decided that all our science-fiction dreams are already coming true, so he's going over to grace the engineers with his presence."

"You should've warned them, Larry," somebody murmured in response. The men laughed. She chatted with the writers for several minutes, then took her leave to visit the rest. Around the compartment she recognized British accents, a couple of Kazakh writers, and several Japanese as well. An unexpected nurturing response toward her passengers arose from somewhere with Minella, a complement, she figured, to the day's sexual tension, but still there nonetheless. Her guests were intelligent for the most part, but otherwise a varied and interesting bunch; they were large and small, gentle and hostile, serious and funny. And almost every one of them seemed to hold her in awe, particularly gushing over her hundred-flight stripes. She liked their attention and their praise, but wondered if they'd ever thought that a professional was supposed to do her job well, and do it well many times, to advance in her field.

I'm part of their dream, she realized. They've written and created and holoced this stuff for years, but outside of *verb* adventures they haven't been in space itself. Especially not all together like this, like it's some kind of convention or something, a convocation of dreamers. *Dreams*. Did she still have dreams? Well, lately there

were the kind in which she and Leo—but those were universal. Other dreams? As if in answer, outside The Window, the slowly rotating view caught the full orb of the Moon. Minella's heart skipped a beat. The Moon! Of course she had dreams; she wanted to go to the Moon, and not in a freakin' *verb* mini-rover, either! The small colony there didn't offer a lot of pay—not nearly what she was getting for LEO flights, several trips a month lately—but those people up there were advertising for help. For pioneers. And, hell, landing a Lunar Clipper on the Moon had to be even easier than here; there was no re-entry maneuver, no thermal environment to dick around with. And those exo-atmospheric ships, all bulbous and thrusting, they looked so slick . . .

She shook off the image, but the hormone surge remained, warm and sensuous. Maybe, tonight, when they were back home, she would ask Leo for a tour of his South White Sands ranch. Maybe in one of those grassy fields . . .

"Leo, what's our status?" she barked into the armpanel, surprising herself with the intensity of her sudden frustration.

Somewhat timidly, her co answered, "Well, ma'am, things are right okay. Anything wrong?"

"No, Mr. Ecklin, I'm just a little overwrought at the humongous *window* our paying guests have got down here. Take a look on video, would you?" She hoped he would buy that explanation for her nervousness; she would be wanting to get friendly later. No use to botch it up so soon.

"Whoo-ee, so that's our 'outstanding customer service feature,' huh? Next thing you know, we'll be leading them by the hand and hauling them around like space surfers, tethers and all." Minella filled him in on the tech details, assuring him that the new technologies would work as well as the others, and warning that old-timers like themselves had better start viewing the *verb* tech reports daily.

"Hell, yes, Tina, otherwise we're liable to come out to the Sands and find some goddamn flyin' saucers have replaced our big 'ol Clippers." Minella started to tell him that she had indeed seen some recent reports of test flights of solid-state aircraft with MHD drives that could achieve orbital altitudes, though not yet orbital speeds. She would hold off with that information; future hyper-shock was coming too fast already. Ecklin, too, was hesitating, she could tell. "Er, Cap'n, Tina, I've come up with another little 'customer delight' here that you should know about."

"Now what, Leo? Is it an EVA?"

"You'd better come here and see for yourself, I think."

Oh God, now what? the captain thought. Her hang-over headache was returning, and she didn't know if flight regs for a tourist ship allowed the crew to take any drugs on duty or not. What a freakin' day!

Minella writhed her way back through the flexible tubeway to the crew module, where Ecklin sat frowning. "You know, Leo, crawling through that after-freakin'-thought crawl-tube makes me feel like a defecation osmosing its way out an intestine."

"I feel the same way, Tina, but not because I crawled through no Clipper guts. Look at this segment of the itinerary."

1400Z, the schedule read. CARGO EJECTION. STATION-KEEPING SATELLITES.

Minella moaned. "We're going to launch freakin' *satellites*? Where does it say that? Where in our damn contract did it say that we're doing tech work?"

Leo shook his head. "I guess, Cap'n, where we both signed, agreeing to 'assist and ensure customer satisfaction.'"

"I say *not*, Leo, and I'm the captain of this ship!"

The copilot fingered the thin disfilm of the contract. "Not of the passenger compartment," he said gloomily. "Attendant staff represents the Corporation in the Passenger Compartment," he read, "'And the captain may override Attendant Authority only in the event of a clear and present danger.'"

"So we've brought along Oliver-freakin'-Wendell Holmes, too?" Leo just stared at her, puzzled. "As I said, Mr. Ecklin, sir, I guess you and I are in the satellite launch business, too."

"... three ... two ... one ... Launch!" Minella said in a weary voice, stroking the CARGO EJECT command on her companel. "Leo, pull up the *verb* and let's see what the hell we are going to have accompanying our ship for the next hour and a half." They'd have to spew out a huge retrieval net and pull the junk back inside and belay it properly. There were huge fines for leaving mass in orbit, crowded as things were getting. Minella thought of that vision of the pristine Moon through The Window below. Now, out there on and around the Moon, everything's still wide open, clean, no regs. Thoughts of a reclaimed virginal White Sands melded with images of the Moon as her attention was slowly drawn to *verb* pictures of the Earth's three newest orbital companions.

"Leo, what is all that crap?"

"Dunno, Tina, looks like toys to me. A wheel, a model rocket, a big doll?"

"Leo?"

"Tina?"

"Wanna go?"

"Captain's duty, ma'am."

"Laugh and I'll break your ..."

"Lip's zipped, Cap'n, ma'am."

Groaning, Captain Tina Minella slipped into the tube-way. As Ecklin's laughter echoed down the ten-meter length, she crawled back into the ship's bloated intestine and inched herself down to steerage. It's *not* steerage; they have it better than Leo and I do!

As she pulled herself upright in the passenger room, orchestral music filled her ears, a beautiful swelling and pulsing fullness of musical experience Minella never dreamed possible. And in a converted cargo hold she marveled. She recognized the tune. Somebody was even singing it. "... you glisten and gleam ... past forest and town ...". Another chorus, in German, drowned out the English singers. She laughed out loud. What a crew of people, these creatives. These dreamers! She liked them

all; hell, she loved them! They were family; they would make her find her dream yet. Where the hell was that virgin Moon, anyway?

The singing stopped, and soft applause began. Over to one side, Minella could see two people manipulating card-sized remote controls, operating, she supposed, the toy satellites she had just launched for them. Strange, but the display screen that filled the other half of the tourist deck showed a twilight tropical scene from Earth, somewhere in the Hindi Empire, she guessed. A lone figure sat in a hypertechnology convalescent carrier. An older word, *wheelchair*, came to mind. She frowned. Maybe her newfound family had its sober side too?

She turned to The Window to share the vision, the dream that the toys in space meant to these weird and wonderful people. There, outside, rotated a miniature space station, not over two meters in diameter, made of two parallel wheels, one obviously unfinished, with a connecting hub. And approaching that hub slowly was something like an old-fashioned concept of a hypersonic shuttle craft. *Pan Am*, the blue printing on the side said. She didn't recognize the significance of it, not at all.

The display screen on the far wall tiled itself, simultaneously showing the wheel-ridden person somewhere in the Hindi, and views from cameras on board the toy space station and the model shuttlecraft. Minella had to admit the scenes were realistic enough to keep her interest, as the relative motion changed with the different viewpoints. In one scene, the Earth was stationary, a great blue orb below, with Wheel and Shuttle spinning around their own axes; another view, from the stationary Wheel, yielded a rotating Shuttle and a cardioiding Earth; and finally, as seen from the Shuttle, the other two objects danced in a celestial ballet.

And then she saw it—not a cosmic ballet, but a cosmic waltz, perfectly timed, perfectly synchronized, climaxing as Shuttle mated Wheel, threading the needle, female and male. Perfect in concept, beautiful in execution. She found herself applauding with all the others, and for some unknown reason, tears wet her cheeks.

On the display wall, the ancient wheel-bound man raised one arm in salute and murmured softly, "Although we're a few years off the mark, I thank you, my friends. Stanley, all you others, thank you for this day. And thanks, too, to Bob and Isaac and Gene, now in a galaxy far, far away, where far too many have gone before." Tears oozed from beneath his optic enhancers. The entire audience stood in silence a full minute, then erupted into cheers as the image faded, the man in Hindi continuing to wave all the way to black.

Again, Minella joined her new family in honoring one of its senior members. Just right now, though, she was too embarrassed to ask who this Mr. Clarke was and what the toys were for.

A tall, friendly man with a British accent and a slight, balding man with a military bearing approached her. The passenger manifest had listed them as physicists by training, speculators by profession, one from Maryland, one from Colorado. "Did you enjoy the display, Captain?" British asked.

"Yes, very much, but . . . ?"

"What does it mean?" Military offered.

"Yes."

Military volunteered, "You've heard of geosynch orbits? Clarke is the one who suggested comsats be placed there."

"For God's sake, *that* Clarke? Sixty years ago? The same man?"

"That's the one," British said. "He wrote spec-phi back then, and a famous flatfilm that featured 'The Blue Danube' and the docking of the shuttle with the wheel."

"Now I understand, and I thank you." She rubbed her chin a moment. That was one flatfilm she'd endure, if only for the imagery. "But what about that third satellite, the doll?"

British rubbed his jaw. "Doll? Arthur and Stanley didn't use a doll in that sequence did they, Doug?"

"No, Charles, but I—my lord, look! Out the window!"

In the instant it took for her to spin around to see, Captain Minella had the sinking feeling she wasn't going to like what she saw.

She didn't.

A man was out there, trying to manipulate an ancient handheld reaction wand. He waved as he shot by the window, disappearing toward the fore end of the ship. Minella could tell by his oscillations that he was a complete novice in space. He would probably kill himself; worse yet, if he slammed into the retrieval hatch, he could damage the ship! The next few milliseconds she allocated for rage at any fool who would let himself get launched out with model spacecraft, for God's sake! Who—

"Oh, shit, it's Jerry!" someone screamed.

"Damn, and we've got another sequel duel!" the white-beard moaned.

"We'll get him for you, Larry!" a raucous reply came.

Minella exploded. "As captain of this ship, I take command of this passenger deck. There is now absolute martial law on this vessel!" The vacuum-head ranking attendant covered, but thoughtfully activated her recorder. "You *will* obey my commands! Now, someone who knows this guy out there"—she waved a hand toward the window—"is he crazy? Is he trying to kill himself, or hurt my ship? Or what? And where did he get that suit?"

Half a minute passed. Minella wasn't happy. "You, there, Larry. You know him?"

"We write together," the white-beard moaned.

"What's this all about?"

"I don't know; he just said he found the emergency crew suits."

Minella nodded. Those were easily donned; any fool could use them. One was doing that, in fact. "But what's he out there for? A joyride?"

"Beats me, Captain."

A very tall, very bearded Levantine man raised a hand. "I'm Harry," he said. I agree with that, Minella thought. Jerry said something about not wanting to ride in a bitch of a ship."

This made no sense at all. What was wrong with her ship?

"That's what he said, Captain. And . . . ?"

"And what, Harry?"

"That he would change the name or die trying."

Great, Minella thought, but he might just do that and take the rest of us with him.

Minella was getting very weary of crawling through the tubeway like an undigested clod of unspeakable fecal matter. Leo Ecklin knew her well enough that he wouldn't joke about it any more.

"Leo, we've got an unauthorized EVA out there. Our third toy wasn't a doll, it was a grown man." Like many of her femma friends, Tina was beginning to suspect those last two words were an oxymoron.

Ecklin was silent for a moment, then took in a deep breath. "Customers starting to delight themselves a bit too much, huh, Tina?"

"He's got an emergency crew suit on, so there's about an hour's worth of air. But he's shooting around with some damn handheld reaction wand."

"Gonna kill himself."

Minella glared. "Thanks for all the moral support, Leo. I think he's gonna try to paint something on the ship—something really cranko like that."

Ecklin was suddenly very serious, a side Minella hadn't seen before, all business. "Tina, has he got a spray, or what? He could screw up the thermal protection surfaces, maybe cause something to crack during re-entry, if the conductivity varies, or if something begins to flake. Can you raise him on the radio?"

Minella stroked the frequency search command on. Their space boy was singing. "Some damned Russian song, Leo, I don't know what it means."

"Jerry, this is the captain speaking. Listen to me. You are not to alter the surface of this ship, you could endanger the lives of sixty people. Get your ass back inside this moment!" Leo gave her a circle thumb and forefinger, then pointed at a wall displate. An exterior camera had the EVA directly in view. He was holding himself against the hull with brief puffs of his reaction wand, while his left hand was pulling a beer can-sized device out of a work belt.

"Hey, lady," the radio voice came back, "I'm a paying passenger and I've got a little job to do. Now don't you worry your little mind. I've got this figured out and I consulted the best minds in the business." Leo was indicating on the *vercb* the man's precise location: right over the ship's official registration numbers. And right over its name.

The best minds of *which* business? Minella wondered sarcastically. The spec-phi guys downstairs?

"Set your mind at ease, Ms. Minella-Vinella," the man was crowing, "I've got a little spray gun here, and it's just going to modify, so to speak, the atrocious appellation of this here space ship. Give it back its real name, the one I've cursed for forty years."

Why? the captain wondered. Why risk your freakin' life for something like that?

"Listen, Jerry," she pleaded, "please save yourself and us, and just come back to the cargo ejection hatch. We'll

bring you back in when we retrieve the spacecraft models. The net will envelop you and you'll be safe."

"Thought of that, I did, and I shall. But first, let me . . ." He bent over and pointed the spray can at the ship's surface.

"Don't, you fool!" the captain yelled.

But he did. After a few frantic strokes, the space graffiteer found himself unable to hold his position along the hull, being pushed away by the spray jet reaction. Realizing his situation, he tossed aside the spray can and took the reaction wand with both hands. It was no use; he was already in a spin and heading away from the ship, en route to disaster. Even experienced spacers had died horrible, lonely deaths, their screams and prayers and crying transmitted to the world. This man was going to pay for his prank with his life. In minutes he would be irretrievably lost.

Minella felt sick. They carried no EVA craft, no EVA lifelines to toss the poor man. And certainly the Clipper couldn't go after him. You just don't maneuver lightly in space a craft sixty meters long, massing a hundred tons, not with the precision needed to head off and intercept a spinning target without smashing into it. Even if she tried, even if by some miracle of orbital mechanics they could rescue Jerry, she could not—*would not*—risk the fuel safety factor and endanger the crew, the tourists, the ship, for one man. Period.

As it was, it looked like the first tourist trip into space would be more historic than anyone had intended—the first tourist death in space, broadcast to the worldnets, courtesy of Captain Tina Minella. She was defeated, sickened, helpless.

Ecklin chewed his lip. "Tina, I saw you on the monitor down there with those people. They're good folks. We can't just let one of them die for a little joke, not after all the trouble they went to, after what they did for their friend down in Hindi." On the displate screen, the struggling white figure was still spinning out of control, diminishing in size with every second. "I'd put on a suit and go get him, but damn, we didn't plan on any EVA, and I don't have anything to get him with."

Irritated with herself, Minella fought back sobs. "Leo, you old cowboy, you got a lariat on you, to rope him and pull him back in, like in the old movies?"

"Not a rope for my name, and our retrieval net won't go out that far. Hell, he's half a click away now. But gotta be something we can do. Damn!"

Ecklin shoved her aside abruptly. "Movies? Hell, that's it, Tina, you said the magic word, got yourself a speculator." He jumped headfirst into the tubeway. "Look out, world, here comes a big turd!" Without explanation, he was gone down the innards of the ship. Minella started to follow, but safety regs required one pilot in the module at all times. Besides, there were nearly sixty people down there to help Leo. If they could.

Minutes passed. Nervously, Minella followed both the image of their all but lost passenger and its tiled companion view of Leo down on tourist deck, gesticulating and yelling at the assembled horde of creatives who were in shock at the fate of their compatriot.

One man came over from The Window and spoke to Leo, and together they went off screen. Minutes later, Leo emerged, grunting and cursing, from the tubeway. "Gotta fix this freakin' rectum tube, next time for sure."

He stood, then bent to pull someone else through. She hoped his scheme would work; losing a civilian passenger, even by accident, was grounds enough for dismissal and revocation of contract, but violating crew module entry rules could mean jail. "No time to explain, Tina. Just zoom in on Ol' Jerroo, and let my man, here, do his thing." He pronounced it *thang*, but it sounded beautiful to Minella.

The man was the one who'd been using the remote control device when she was there for the Clarke ceremony, the Shuttle-Wheel docking scene they'd recreated so beautifully and memorably. What could that guy do? Just a short, fat gray-haired model rocketeer?

Just then, the Pan Am shuttlecraft shot into view from overhead, heading out into the darkness. What? Then it dawned on her, and she cheered. "Go, *Pan Am*, go! Oh, Leo, you are one beautiful man!" She switched the displate screen images to the large viewing screen on the tourist deck. We might as well all share the drama, she decided. Win or lose, the family has got to stick together.

As the model rocketeer put *Pan Am* through its paces, Minella had to admit the man was an expert. The tiny shuttle overcame the wayward spaceman in a matter of minutes, slowing down as it neared him. "Throw away that damn handjet, Jerry," she yelled into the screen. The figure complied. Why didn't one of us think of that sooner? she wondered. The answer, she knew, was that she was as panicked as he was, and thinking about as clearly.

The shuttle docked with the tumbling spaceman. As expected, the combined masses started rotating together. "Listen, man," Leo said into the mike, "no need to panic, we've got you and we're going to bring you back. Just do what I say."

"Okay, I hear you," the spaceman whispered through his fear. Minella sighed. It was the first coherent communication from the man in some time. There was hope.

"In your workbelt, pull out the carabiner and clip it to the shuttle module. Got that?"

There was no place to clip the snap, but since the man and the model rotated together, he was able to pull out enough cord and tie it around the ship.

"But I'm still gonna rotate, no matter what! I can't stop!" the radio voice shrieked.

"You're tied up to the shuttle securely?"

Calmly. "Yes, I think so."

"Now push yourself away from it. Let go of it!" Leo commanded.

"No! It's my only hope!"

"I'm gonna come out there and kick your ass, you crybaby!" Leo yelled. "Now do as I say and let freakin' GO!"

On the screen the tiny dot fissioned, becoming two. Leo turned to the rocketeer and said, "Aim that thing this way and bring that stray cow home."

It was a magnificent sight, Minella thought. The Pan Am

shuttle gliding by in all its majesty, towing behind it a wildly spinning, spacesuited figure who by now was gesturing angrily at The Window. She turned to Leo, who was smiling at the video image. "You're bad, Leo. You had our friend here take him past the window, just to show off."

Leo smiled. "Windows are made for show, and boy, did we give them one this trip. These here customers should be delighted, don't you think? Besides, this guy deserves what he gets. Net ready?"

She nodded. "Let's do it."

On screen, a wispy net a hundred meters long and half as wide shot out like a spider's spinneret, enveloping the model wheel space station, the Pan Am shuttle, and one very dizzy touristonaut. Ecklin begged off the official welcoming committee, so Minella crawled the tube once more. She stood waiting as the cargo airlock pressurized.

"Stand back," she told the tourists who had crowded into the small antechamber. She popped open the door and pressed the button that dissolved the material of the temporary net. She jerked the castaway to his feet, saying, "Proud of yourself, my panicky friend?"

Through the fogged spherical helmet, pitiful eyes, half-glazed over with fear and shock, stared down at her. The man started to answer, but when his mouth opened, it was not words that came out.

Minella snorted in disgust and walked away. "Take care of your vomiting friend, folks. I don't want to see him again." Watching the scene on the monitor, Ecklin started laughing so hard he cried.

The landing was an anticlimax, Captain Minella concluded, chiding herself for the innuendo. The Clipper had performed its standard nose-down re-entry, its unique nose-up-and-tail-down maneuver, finally descending on a plume of fire, the way God and Robert Heinlein intended. What a trip!

The passengers filed onto the elevator, saying good-byes and making extravagant promises to put both pilots in their next productions and publications. The troublemaker came by to make his apologies. And to give his thanks.

"I was a real shit out there, and if I'd died, I would've deserved it," Minella and Ecklin just raised their eyebrows at him; they didn't disagree one bit. "But I want to thank you all the same. That was just brilliant, rescuing me with a model space ship. It was just classic. You know, it reminded me a bit of that rescue scene in *Destination Moon* where . . ." Jerry's bearded friend led him, muttering, onto the elevator.

"You know, I wonder what it was he was doing out there with the spray paint, anyway?" Leo said. "Wanna go check?" Minella nodded. The maintenance elevator accessed every square centimeter of the ship. It was two minutes to the graffiti site.

* * *

Wind strummed the tall, waving grass all around them, a soft musical accompaniment to the night sky, a wide, dark velvet canopy flecked with diamond-bright stars. In the distance a coyote wailed. "Hey, the Moon's not out tonight. What's the animal baying for?" Tina Minella asked softly where she lay, drawing the blanket up around her bare shoulders.

Leo turned over on the blanket and faced her. "'Cause there's no Moon, that's why. Moon here or Moon gone, no difference to a coyote. Those old boys don't need an excuse."

Minella smiled with deep satisfaction. "Thank you for this day, Leo, and for this wonderful night. Without you there with me today, my career would be over, that writer would be dead, and—"

"And?" He kissed her eyelids, one at a time.

"And we wouldn't be here, right now, doing what we've just done."

"That's the best part, Tina."

The coyote stopped his complaining momentarily. Tina propped up on one elbow. "Leo, do you understand what old Jerry was painting up there on the Clipper today?"

"Yeah, I know why."

"He painted out the woman's last name? Then painted the name of an Asian city in front of her first name?" She named the place.

"Yeah, that was it; he renamed the craft the *Hanoi Jane*. He was still angry that the old lady had done some propaganda for that side, back in a war, oh, forty or fifty years ago."

"But Hanoi is one of the Asian Tigers now, isn't it?" Her own micro-piezo powered ultrabike came from there, she recalled.

"Yeah, it is. Things change."

"But he seemed so proud of himself." She sounded like she was, too.

Leo, too, had seen the old man's face. Determination, triumph, even in the face of death. Apologies for the inconvenience, but not for his actions. He wondered what it must be like to have such a strong drive, such a vision of what should be done. "Yeah, he *was* proud. In a way, I was proud of him, too. He didn't really harm anyone but himself, and everything turned out fine. He fulfilled a lot of his dreams today." Leo kissed her again, his passion beginning to rise once more.

Afterward, they lay still for a long time. On the eastern horizon, the Moon was rising once more. Minella thought of the little colony up there on that bright new place, needing good pilots at low pay. She recalled her newly adopted family, the creatives, the writers, the dreamers who had been so thrilled in space today, when they got to fulfill a dream they themselves had helped bring about. She felt Leo's strong, slim body next to hers, and his sweat, his beautiful sweat. Yes, it had been a good day for dreams, all the way around. ♦

— This story is for Arthur C. Clarke.

Old Soldiers Never Die

Barry B. Longyear

As the tour bus rounded the circle and approached the Virginia end of the Arlington Memorial Bridge, Mark glanced to his left. Johnny was sitting next to the window, looking through the winter grime toward Roosevelt Island, seeing neither the island nor the fresh flakes of snow falling into the pale gray waters of the Potomac. Johnny Nolan's face was lined and hard set above a full beard salted with gray. The maroon stocking cap on his head was jammed forward, almost covering his eyebrows. The narrowed eyes beneath those brows were dark circled and a long way from the snow and slush of Washington, D.C.



Illustration by Ron Miller

He was back in the jungle, decades in the past, trying hard to forget the things he refused to remember. Mark rubbed his eyes and nodded. That was the problem with them all, he reminded himself.

"Why didn't you get off at the Arlington stop?" he asked Johnny. The man next to the window closed his eyes, turned his head from the wintry scene, and hunched his head down into his shoulders as he attempted to snuggle some warmth from the collar of his faded olive jacket. "Why didn't you get off at the cemetery?" Mark insisted. "You made a contract with the group."

"I know. Sorry." Johnny let out a long sigh and closed his eyes. "I just couldn't."

"You've heard it a thousand times, man. If you don't face what happened and accept it, you're never going to be able to let go of it."

A flash of anger passed over Johnny's features. It quickly faded, leaving him as he had been for twenty-three years: frightened, hostile, confused, depressed, and desperate in his isolation and loneliness. "They're all still alive in my head, Mark. I see them just like they were then. That's the way I want to remember them." He pulled a bare hand from his jacket pocket and waved it around. "On the TV I see these beer-gutted, balding old farts carrying signs in front of the V.A., and I don't know them." He lowered his hand to his lap. "I see my own bald head in the mirror, and I don't know me."

He reached into his jacket pocket and removed a photograph from it. He looked down at the plastic laminated picture, then faced it toward Mark. It depicted eleven young soldiers standing, squatting, and sitting before a burned-out piece of North Vietnamese artillery. The young men were grinning and waving. Not one of them looked older than twenty, although back in group Johnny had said his sergeant, Glenn Dunham, had been close to thirty. Mark could see the young Johnny Nolan standing in the center at the back. He had his arms over the shoulders of the two men who stood at either side.

Young, thought Mark. We were all young once upon a time.

Johnny put the photo back into his pocket and resumed his look out the window of the bus. The traffic on the icy bridge was slow and heavy. It was getting dark. Evening rush hour was beginning, more snow, more cold. "You know what really pisses me off?" asked Johnny.

"What's that?"

"The new kid. The one who joined the group day before yesterday?"

"Dennis," Mark stated.

"Yeah. Desert Storm Dennis."

"How does he make you angry?"

Johnny turned from the window and stared at Mark, his expression shocked. "Why? What kind of a stupid question is that?"

"My kind, I guess."

"Jesus, Mark, don't you ever get tired being a saint?"

"How does Dennis make you angry?"

"Oh, yeah," sneered Johnny. "Find your center, work the process, get in touch with your feelings. How does Dennis make you feel?"

"Okay," said Mark. "So how does Dennis make you angry?"

The bus lurched, found an opening in the traffic, and moved into it. Through the bus's windshield Mark could see the top of the Lincoln Memorial, the barest outline of white against the falling snow. Johnny Nolan was frowning and glowering at his own fists. "Damn Dennis. His war lasted a hundred damn hours and he needs his head screwed back on, not because of all the friends he saw killed, but because of all the Iraqis he thinks he might have killed. What a load of crap." Johnny faced Mark, his eyes glistening. "They're still throwing parties and putting on parades for the bastards! Christ, I even saw a damn Bart Simpson doll wearing desert camouflage!"

"So, what I hear you saying, Johnny, is that you're jealous."

"You're goddamn right I'm jealous!" Johnny glanced up at all the faces in the bus that were looking back at him. He slumped back in his seat, sighed, and nodded. Embarrassed once again, he slumped down in his seat and glared at his knees. "Yeah. Jealous. Who wouldn't be? A parade isn't much, but it's better than having people spit on you."

The air brakes squealed as the bus pulled up at the stop on the circle in front of the Lincoln Memorial. Mark grabbed the back of the seat in front of him and pulled himself to his feet. Once he was standing he looked down at Johnny. "This is our stop. Are you coming?"

Johnny looked around. "I don't see it."

Mark pointed. "It's up there, a couple hundred yards north off Bacon Drive."

"I don't know. It's just a damn list of names."

"Come on, Johnny. It's part of the treatment."

"Treatment," muttered Johnny as he angrily shot to his feet and shouldered his way out of the bus, Mark following in his wake.

They walked the snow-covered sidewalks in silence until the black gash of the memorial's east wall leaped out from the dull white that covered Constitution Gardens. The wall was an enormous horizontal splinter pointing toward the Washington Monument. They stood, looking at the memorial from a distance.

Said Johnny at last, "Did you ever hear what that one brass hat said back when they were trying to get this thing built? He said, 'Why build a memorial to losers?'"

"He's an asshole, Johnny. The world's full of them. Let's go."

The path was difficult to see in the diffused light, and Johnny followed in Mark's footsteps until they reached the eighteen-inch-high end of the memorial's west wall. The west wall pointed directly at the Lincoln Memorial. Half buried in the snow at the foot of the wall were tiny American flags, bits of paper, toys, photos, and other mementos. Here and there, their stems thrust into the cracks between the black granite slabs, were flowers. A bright yellow carnation, a withered rose. An elderly woman glanced at Johnny, her gaze met his for an instant, and he turned away. There were only a handful of visitors before the wall, each one within his or her own hell.

The wind-driven flakes stung Johnny's skin as he looked down and saw his dead reflected in the polished surface of the granite. Then he saw the names cut into the stone across his legs.

Turning away from the wall, he swallowed and took a deep breath. "I'm not sure about this."

Mark placed his arm around Johnny's shoulders. "I'm here with you, man. Come on. You know you have to do this."

"Listen. Mark, listen." Johnny sniffed back his tears. "You know, with them all dead and me alive, I used to wonder if there was some reason. You know, God? Maybe I'd been saved for something big, important? But what did I do with it? My life? I can't stand being near anyone, I can't hold down a job, and all I can do is bum around and try to keep a step ahead of the nightmare."

"Come on, Johnny. Your time on the wall's further down."

"I don't know if I can face those names," said Johnny as he stumbled toward the ever thickening wall. "How can I face them?"

"Like you said, Johnny. It's only a list."

They stood before a panel ten feet tall, deep within Nineteen Sixty Nine. Mark kept his hand on Johnny's shoulder as Johnny's eyes searched from the top of the slab toward the bottom. Down and down his gaze fell until it was wrenched to a halt a foot above eye level: Joseph E Levy.

"Oh, Joe," said Johnny, the name escaping quietly from his lips as he reached up and touched the letters. His vision filled with tears. "Joe." Johnny Nolan's mouth broke into an involuntary smile. "Joe. He was a joker. Funny. Real funny guy. He could imitate anyone. In basic when my parents came down to Fort Jackson for graduation, Joe met them. My dad liked Joe a lot. Joe and Mike Hallet came home with me on leave after basic. He shook his head and began to turn away but his fingers touched another name: Glenn A Dunham.

"Sarge. God, sarge." He looked at Glenn Dunham's name so intently and for so long it was as though he had been cast in tortured steel. At last Johnny closed his eyes and shook his head. "Dunham. He seemed so ancient back then. Such a rock, so full of wisdom. What was he? Twenty-seven? Twenty-eight? When he died he couldn't have been more than twenty-eight." Johnny looked at Mark. "In another month I'll be forty-four."

He looked back at the wall, and as he began taking his fingers away from Glenn A Dunham's name, they touched another. He found Gerald P Ross, Edward I Lawson, Richard K Garrison, Anthony R Geneso, L Randall Brown.

"Hey, Leroy," said Johnny as he coughed and laughed. The laugh was forced, for Johnny Nolan's eyes were

wide and haunted. Wiping the tears from his eyes with his sleeve, Johnny kept looking at where his fingers touched the name of L Randall Brown. "Leroy. He really hated the name Leroy. Man, he was the blackest, angriest, bitterest sonofabitch I ever met in my life. Nineteen, twenty years old. He hated the name Leroy, so naturally we all made a point of calling him Leroy." Johnny frowned as his eyes focused on the past.

"I saw him get it." He moistened his lips and swallowed. "I saw Leroy die." He glanced up and looked at Mark. "It was a night straight out of hell. The noise. People dying, fires and gun flashes everywhere, smoke, screams, damned mortar rounds falling all around, the dirt down my shirt and in my eyes. They were all over us. Leroy and me shared a fighting hole near the wire. We could hear the damn sappers talking to each other. Leroy, he touched my shoulder and pointed. I could see the silhouette of someone cutting through the wire. I aimed and dropped him. I looked back at Leroy and he was leaning up against the side of the hole, his head open at the neck. Like a rubber doll his head was back."

Johnny's face drained of color as he touched the fingers of his left hand to his throat. "An arm. An arm grabbed me. Strong. An arm grabbed me and there was a sharp pain in my chest." His eyes focused on the polished black granite surface as his fingers moved down the names; past the names he knew, his friends, his enemies, past the names he didn't remember, and the names he never knew, until at eye level his fingers stopped on the name John V Nolan.

The edges of the letters were clean and sharp. As he felt them beneath his fingertips, he thought he could read them through his fingers, through the back of his hand. Taking his hand from the wall, he turned it over and saw through his palm the tiny American flag that someone had left at the foot of the wall.

"Mark, my hand!" He faced Mark and saw that Mark's eyes were filled with tears.

"It's okay, man. Just let go. It's way past time. Let go." The soldier was a mist, a vapor, then only a memory. A few scratches in a black granite slab.

Mark was alone. On the snow at his feet was a photograph of eleven young soldiers standing, squatting, and sitting before a burned-out piece of North Vietnamese artillery. The young men were grinning and waving. The young Johnny Nolan stood in the center at the back. He had his arms over the shoulders of the two men who stood at either side. Mark picked up the photo and stuck it in the crack to the left of Johnny Nolan's name.

Back at the bus stop, Mark climbed the stairs into the bus, took a seat, and closed his eyes. He was happy to be riding back from the wall all alone. And sad. ♦

A History of the Antipodes



Phillip C. Jennings

1947

The mood was already tense before the bulkhead swung open. Self-appointed leader of the emigres, Monsieur Pégoud pitched forward into the pilot-house, caught himself, and spoke over the howl of gale-force winds. "Captain, this is too much! I know you forbade us the freedom of the decks, but we're all being sick down below."

First Mate Rosnevet backed into the doorway to the radio room, ready in case Captain Sibbald signaled him to unlock the gun cabinet. A minor drama lay framed before him. Gray rain beat at the bridge's reinforced windows. Sibbald turned from the wheel of the former whaling ship to face a six-footer in a sodden trenchcoat.

Pégoud's wardrobe stank of 1944, when he last had money and freedom. Three years of

Illustration by Laura and John Lakey

prison had taught him to beg, but Rosnevet could have told the man a thing or two: Nothing aggravated Sibbald more than whining. "Don't protest to me," the captain said, barely controlling his temper. "I didn't make the weather."

"We have had nothing but this weather since rounding the Cape," Pégoud answered. "It's too much. My daughter hasn't kept any food down for three days."

Captain Sibbald's dark brow lowered another fraction. Despite his scowl, Pégoud pressed on. "She's a child, for God's sake. Whatever you think of me, she had nothing to do with it."

"We reach the islands in nine hours," the captain said, reluctantly to concede that much information. "Port-aux-Français is an excellent harbor, and well sheltered. It's best for all that I make fast time to get there." He angled to focus on the sailor behind Pégoud. "Ensign, take him back below. I don't want to see his face again."

The bulkhead swung shut on Pégoud's broad back. First Mate Rosnevet stuck the gun-cabinet keys back in his pocket and patted for a cigarette. Sibbald muttered to himself: "Collaborators!"

Rosnevet overheard. "Perhaps they'll breed a new master race on Kerguelen. All this Nordic rain and chill!"

"A race of fascists, suckled on elephant-seal blubber and cabbage!" Captain Sibbald laughed harshly. "Delicacies for our blue-eyed blonds. Have you seen Pégoud's dossier?"

"He was a mayor, not so? In the German zone of occupation, but they propped him in office. A Frenchman! A *true patriot*! His gang chivvied out eight resistance fighters. The Gestapo executed them in the public square."

"And took hostages from the town for good measure." Sibbald sighed. "To hear him, he was just an anti-communist. Things would have been worse without me. The executions were out of my control."

The captain's voice rose. "This slime makes me sick. Pégoud, de Volz, Clugny and all the rest. Them and their good wives, and precious children! Kerguelen Island is better than they deserve. They made their choice—so-called freedom here, or twenty years of prison back home. Let them whine! These winds will take their noise clear to Australia."

Rosnevet spoke. "In Germany ex-Nazis try not to get caught in the French zone of occupation. If they can't escape, they cross to the Americans."

"Do you think there's such a beast as an 'ex-Nazi'?" the captain answered. "Once a single soul dies for the sake of your ideology, you're chained for eternity. You are that thing, even if you come to hate it."

But not your children. First Mate Rosnevet thought silently, distancing himself from his Captain's vehemence. Sibbald must have lost someone in the war, someone close and dear. *Someday he'll talk about it, but it won't do to press him.* Not now, certainly, with the ship tossing in these heavy seas.

When the crown investigated his lies in the later 1770's and saw what his islands were really like, they threw hapless Captain Kerguelen in jail. He did not survive to the French Revolution. Thus ended the *ancien régime's* answer to Britain's Captain Cook.

It's difficult to blame the government. Kerguelen's average summer temperature is 45 degrees Fahrenheit—and the average *winter* temperature is 40 degrees Fahrenheit. The climate is so overcast that as of this report, no orbital photographs of the archipelago are yet available. Not for ten years of trying!

A plan to establish a seal-oil refinery after World War Two was scotched when an analyst figured out that the islands' three hundred thousand elephant seals could not sustain their population, if enough were slaughtered to make the business profitable.

Sheep were brought in, *à la* the Falkland Islands in much the same latitudes. They died of pneumonia from waterlogged wool.

More recently, reindeer have been introduced. My sources don't say who is herding the reindeer—perhaps the same people who were formerly supposed to work the refinery.

The only *documented* inhabitants are French meteorologists. They continue the scientific work begun in the International Geophysical Year of 1957. Miserable fellows they must be, issuing the same report day after day: forty-some degrees, more rain, strong winds from the west. Not a job worth doing for its own sake, but their *real* purpose is to monitor the effect of Antarctic weather on the world at large.

Oh, those winds—as in Iceland, winds and summer frosts are a powerful combination, enough to keep trees from growing. Kerguelen's tundra is home to a species of wingless bees, who crawl from flower to flower. Other evolutionary adaptations to the climate? Rats, rabbits and dogs, all introduced the last two centuries, have become albinos from lack of sunlight. The rabbits eat the indigenous Giant Kerguelen Cabbage, the largest plant life on the island, growing three feet tall.

I'm sorry if it sounds like I'm making these things up. What else? There are actually three hundred islands in the archipelago, although one is so much larger than the rest that it's easy to slip from the plural to the singular. They are the only land mass of any size (more than two hundred square miles) directly antipodal to the contiguous forty-eight United States. The Kerguelen "plate" lies at the convergence of Africa, India, Australia and Antarctica, and is the sole volcanic remnant of old Gondwanaland, before the southern supercontinent broke into fragments and fled in all directions.

I wrote to the French consulate in Chicago for information. They were not generous. Nor have I found any articles on Kerguelen in the long history of *National Geographic* magazine. It's easy to suspect that these islands conceal a Secret. If France wanted to hide some facility, I can't imagine a better place. For that matter, if someone *else* wanted to do something sneaky, I doubt the French

police the area well enough to prevent them. They certainly did not prevent German U-boats from using the islands in World War Two as a base to prey on ships rounding South Africa. International legislation to restrict whaling will isolate the region even more completely, perhaps to become a paradise for marine mammals.

1991

Career traveler Alison Deever cleared a dozen manuscripts from her editor's guest chair, and sat down.

"Saint Paul's Rock?" Tom took the heap out of her hands. "Three quarters of the rim of a semi-active volcano? Lady, you must think I'm crazy!"

"Just ask for permission to go there. You've got the same profile as me," Alison said. "Ignore this desk, and we're both free-lance photojournalists. If the French say you can visit this other island, and they won't let me do Kerguelen, I'll know they're hiding something."

"Maybe they're sexist." Tom turned to stare out the window; smears of pigeon crap, and the towers of lower Manhattan beyond.

Alison sighed. "I've wanted to shoot Kerguelen since college seventeen years ago, but not enough to get a sex change. You'd think I'd have advantages. I know French, and those weather scientists in Port-aux-Français are probably starved for female companionship." *If they're still there*, she thought to herself. Her sources kept talking about budget cuts and scaled-down programs.

"So this is a ruse? You want me to expose their attitudes?" Tom asked. He studied Alison's prematurely white hair, her plump, forever-young face and her sturdy figure. *Far Seas* magazine might not be interested in Kerguelen. We like dreams, not nightmares. Look what happened with *Geo* when they took the truth route."

Alison sat forward. "I'm not after poverty and blood. —Mountains! Glaciers! Shipwrecked hulks! Elephant seals out the wazoo! *Sturm und drang* and twisted driftwood!"

Tom shrugged. "Why ask permission? Why not just go?"

"Yeah." Alison tightened on the verge of resolution. "*Far Seas* can hire a pilot out of South Africa. We'll radio for an emergency landing when we're twenty minutes away and it's too late to say no."

"It sounds expensive," Tom said. "More in line with *National Geographic's* budget."

"I don't know what it is with those guys," Alison answered. "You'd think they'd be interested. But maybe the French warned them off."

"Now you're paranoid."

"I'm in the wrong market," Alison responded. "Maybe there's *news* there, and not just travel exotica. Atomic weapons tests or something. I ought to contact my friends at CNN."

Tom leaned back in his chair. "Tell you what. We'll go halves if you talk them into it. Different markets, different products—we can keep out of their way, and vice versa."

Alison rose to her feet. "Thanks. It's a start. I know you're not made of money."

Tom waved her off. "Good luck, then. I'll wait to hear from you."

1993

The wedding was officiated by Captain Borda the night before the October supply ship was scheduled to depart Port-aux-Français. Young Julia Foy, née Julia Pégoud, left with her scientist husband for a honeymoon and a new life at the Institut de Technologie in Le Mans. In her trousseau was a vial of "vanilla flavoring." Julia was a dutiful cook, but she wouldn't have a kitchen of her own until she reached France.

The docks of her departure were two hours behind grandpere Pégoud's bent back. Pégoud paused in his thoughts. *New life?* In Julia's new home she would open Mama's recipe book and set to work. She'd twist off the cap, and sniff, and think her vanilla had gone bad. Four hours of relative health—time to infect a few others. Six hours of woozy, lightheaded sickness, and then a sudden collapse.

Pégoud shook his head. She'd be the first to die, but sacrifices had to be made for the sake of a purified humanity. Now the thing was done and out of his hands. As the emigre limped up the trail that led home to Baie Accessible, he wondered if he'd ever walk these eighteen kilometers again.

No more arduous pretense. No more trapping rabbits, and butchering seals, and raiding the penguin rookeries for eggs like some aboriginal savage. Pégoud stopped and took a sip of wedding brandy to celebrate a future without Jews and Negroes. Doctor Hartmann had a fast yacht to take him east to the lab. Afterward it was just a matter of monitoring world radio.

What a coincidence they'd ever met! But Hartmann had been stationed here in the War from '40 to '42, and he remembered the utter isolation of Presq'île Hoche, so perfect for his work. And he'd had amazing luck. When Admiral Dönitz surrendered in May of '45, Hartmann's U-boat was carrying a cargo of perfectly forged British pound-notes to Ireland, in hopes of disrupting the enemy's economy. On a beach not far from Galway, twenty-three sailors divided their fortune and went separate ways: all but Hartmann were arrested within a fortnight.

Now Pégoud and Hartmann were old men, with shared memories of the same tragic era, totally opposite fates during the decades that came after, and identical plans for a racially pure world. Aryanism triumphant! Five years for Doctor Hartmann's disease to run its course, and then Pégoud's colony could transplant anywhere it chose to.

Pégoud tossed his empty bottle and continued his shambling trek. A few kilometers later, he heard a buzz-saw noise, the sound of twin engines carried fitfully by the wind. As usual, the cloud ceiling loomed low over Mount Courbet. The emigre never saw the airplane that

landed Alison Deevers just west of the meteorological base at Port-aux-Français.

The staff waved flares to guide her pilot in. Once down, Alison unstrapped with fingers half-paralyzed with tension. The pilot slumped back in his seat, closed his eyes, and muttered an Afrikaaner prayer.

Cheerful young Frenchmen took Alison's luggage and handed it into an incongruously normal-looking Renault; a city car in Land Rover territory. The thing growled and puffed blue exhaust, and took the two visitors along a mile or two of "road" into the settlement.

Inside the largest shack Alison introduced herself all round. "I'm a photographer. As long as I'm here, I'd like to take pictures."

She passed out copies of her Norway travelogue from last year's Christmas issue of *Far Seas*. The French asked questions. Her answers might not have pleased their government, but the government was far away and her hosts—most seemed the age of graduate students—faced nine months of isolation and boredom before the winter supply ship, at a ratio of eleven men to two not very attractive women.

They told her where to go for penguins, and seal breeding grounds, and rugged vistas. "The further west, the more mountains. And big glaciers! *Big* glaciers!" Alison let them tell her what her maps already showed, and learned some things as a result. Two new shipwrecked hulks. A coal mine! "Dug before World War One. The prisoners still use it."

"Prisoners?" Alison repeated.

"Oh, no. *Colonists*," someone corrected. "They came after the Second War, and scattered here and there. We just had a wedding yesterday. One of their girls—pretty, yes?" He looked around for confirmation, then tapped his head. "But not lively up here. For her it was a ticket back to France, and our friend Foy has someone to sleep with until they tire of each other."

"I never read anything about settlers," Alison complained. "*Reindeer*, sure—"

"Tomorrow we show you our reindeer," another young man volunteered, lanky and good to look at in his jeans. "Now that summer's coming, we'll be herding them up to the central plateau." He tapped a wall-map to trace the route.

"I'd like to shoot that. How many colonists?" Alison persisted.

"A couple dozen families," the older woman said. "Henri keeps the books. He's our notary. We had a priest back in the seventies, but he got reassigned."

"And left a monument of bottles as his memorial." People were talking right and left. Alison barely kept track of who was who.

Henri shrugged, a short man with a pipe and burn-holes in his sweater. "Sixty-one, if Claire de Volz hasn't delivered yet. Her dad's tribe lives south of the bay, at Port Douzieme. A land this poor means they can't centralize. And when they do gather, us meteorologists are sometimes not invited."

The reindeer man—Leo?—smiled at Henri. "You're

not blond enough. They're fussy about fraternizing with *untermenschen*." His voice had *potential*: he should have been an actor or a politician. It sounded as if he had great hollow spaces inside him, and it was clear he knew its power.

Alison looked about. "Uh, I brought a tent."

"No need." If Leo was a lean young lion, pipe-smoking Henri was an avuncular teddy bear. "Port-aux-Français is built for how things used to be, back when we had a proper budget and a staff of twenty-seven. There's a free hut due east, toward the Isthmus—"

"How about the chapel?"

"Or that cabin on Point Molloy," Leo suggested. "It gives her a head start if she wants to take pictures up in the wilds."

Henri opened his hands to Alison. "The choice is yours. But what if my superiors get huffy when I radio the news of your arrival? If they say not to give you help—well, then the chapel's gone. No reason you can't sleep there tonight, though. Uh, the pilot . . . ?"

"We're separate," Alison explained.

"He can stay in Foy's bunk," Leo said. Alison heard the pop of a cork, and someone passed her a glass. "Here's to our new guests!"

1994

There was a trick to contacting CNN. With the right insert, the pocket calculator they'd given Alison in Atlanta computed when the relay satellite was most nearly overhead, linking her to Johannesburg, or Perth.

Good old Henri kept strict hours; daytime for *this*, evening for *that*. Alison didn't like to transmit when he worked the radio shack, even if her message was a coded stream of ones and zeros. That made it harder.

On top of that, though Jo-burg and Perth were staffed twenty-four hours a day, the night shifts weren't always competent at picking up messages.

For four glorious months, Alison shot pictures of glaciers and mountains and men in tight jeans, but now she was near enough to the end of her film supply to grow concerned about delays. These last five days she'd sought confirmation about the plane coming to fetch her. Or maybe not coming. It hadn't landed *yet*, and that was strong evidence she hadn't got through.

Maybe her battery packs were deteriorating. They worked well enough for her vidcam, but maybe they weren't charging up to the needs of the radio transmitter. She'd have to wait until nine tonight, and try again. If she timed this excursion right, she'd be back on the plateau, with a couple rolls of still shots around the Presq'île Hoche shipwreck.

After hours of battle against cliffs and glacial rivers, all angled against her course, the ship lay ahead and below, accessible at low tide and heartening in its reality. Unlike the other wrecks she'd seen, it was oddly vertical: it must have rammed the stony beach straight on, and hardly keeled sideways at all.

"More suicide than accident," Alison muttered. There

was a feud on this island between the colonists and the weather scientists—so much so that Julia Poy's marriage was remarkable, and Alison was sorry she'd missed it. Both sides expressed violent feelings, and made extreme claims. All this, and jumbles of old whale bones, and the occasional freshly gutted seal carcass, told Alison this was a harsh and bloody land, where prim upright hulks did not belong.

She found out more as she hiked closer. For a moment neither rain nor torn gusts of fog obstructed her vision, and she saw cables strung from the wreck's port side, anchoring it against a starboard collapse.

Some colonist family had taken it over. Alison nodded. They did that sort of thing; harvesting all they could from the ocean that stormed around them.

She kept hiking, though without the excitement she'd felt in November. There'd be a wife, with too many tow-headed children. She'd be lonely, and dump her life story while showing Alison around. More lace curtains, more kerosine lamps . . . she'd ask about television, and sigh, with a far look in her watery blue eyes. Alison wondered why there wasn't a satellite dish anywhere on Kerguelen.

A hundred feet from the ship's prow Alison jerked back from an explosion at her feet. Gravel stung, and she heard the bang of a gun. "Stop! Arrest! Halt!"

Up on the ship's bow, a man in a dark coat moved into view. "You come here!" He had the strangest accent, guttural and Oxonian at once.

A second man hobbled out. Both were old. "Have you got a uterus?" the first man asked.

"What?" Alison didn't mean to be difficult to a madman with a rifle, but he couldn't have meant what she'd heard.

"A womb," he repeated. "Are you fertile?"

"Y-yes!" There was anger in her voice, as well as fear.

"Come. There's a ladder around the other side." Alison kept her hands widely away from her camera bag, and walked carefully. Crossing in front of the prow she saw a second craft, sheltered from earlier view behind the wreck's hull, a large powerboat-yacht that most certainly did not belong in these surroundings. She reached the ladder, and climbed. The two old men stood apart to let her pass between them. "Through the door," the armed one ordered.

The corridor was narrow and stank of diesel from some chugging generator. "Turn right. Pégoud, fetch the handcuffs."

Alison turned right into a tight cubby. She angled sideways and kicked the door shut behind her. Metal banged against its frame—a frame so distorted the door no longer fit. It rebounded open.

"Don't do that anymore."

"I won't," Alison apologized earnestly.

"We have heard of you," the old gunman said. "The American journalist. What ancestry?"

"Swedish. Irish. Frisian. You know what that is?"

"Frisian? Yes." The man nodded. "Good stock. An ancient people."

Alison shrugged.

"We may value your eggs. Here, Pégoud has cuffs. Put them on. Snap them shut."

Alison obeyed. Her heart sank.

"Sit. Pégoud, strap her in the chair."

The chair had belts for her waist, legs and upper arms. "I warn you, the whole world will learn about this," she said. "I have contacts, and if they don't hear from me—"

"It'll be because they're sick, and soon dead. We get radio here. There's an epidemic in western Europe."

"You're crazy. I've heard nothing about it."

"Next week there'll be nothing else on the air. Much noise, and then a long silence. Excuse me. My name is Doctor Hartmann."

Alison kept silent. Pégoud tightened the belts savagely around her. Doctor Hartmann nodded at his companion and left the room.

He returned with a syringe. "It's a woman's nightmare—the mad gynecologist. I'll spare you. You wouldn't like the looks of the table in my surgery, but I've had plenty of practice. The world is soon to need all the pregnancies it can manage. You must contribute. Anatomy is destiny, eh?"

"This is a crime. I'll get an abortion!"

"From whom? Henri? Leo? No, there will be no abortions in the future. Even the word will vanish." Doctor Hartmann gripped Alison's upper arm, and gave her an injection.

Alison woke in Hartmann's nightmare room, numb to her body, her feet bound in high stirrups. She could see part of a closed door between her bare knees, rimmed with hoarfrost and steaming from cold. The diesel generator made a racket: it couldn't be more than one wall away.

Pégoud came and left. Doctor Hartmann came in. He shook his head. "You are too acid. Wrong time yet for three days. We'll keep you below. I think you feel unhappy about us, yes? Full of hate and violence."

Alison faced away. Hartmann continued. "I would do much to have intelligent companionship. Pégoud only wants to talk about the past, and anyhow, these decades he's been stultified. Take meals with me, and I'll not use drugs to keep you docile. Just the handcuffs, and your promise to be good. Say yes, if just to delude a foolish old man."

"Yes," Alison hated herself, but with cuffs she could still run. It was better than this stuff that made her flesh dead from the inside. Better than three days of oblivion.

Supper came out of cans. Alison catalogued the odors around this "officers' mess": diesel fuel, tidal sea-wrack, wet wool, stale old men, surgical soap and Galois tobacco. She made a clumsy job of eating, hoping Hartmann would lose patience and unlock her handcuffs.

He smiled, his skin thin and loose over his skull. "Tell me about your travels."

"Norway? Ceylon? Vietnam?"

"You've been to Vietnam? Since the war there?" Inevitably with such a beginning, their talk swung to politics; Vietnam versus Iraq. "In the one case we were fighting the people, in the other just a government of thugs."

Hartmann shook his head. "There were no Jews in Vietnam to sap the culture. They've been in Iraq since—since Nebuchadnezzar!" Alison's face hardened, but he went on. "Jews are a disease that carries itself. Thanks to tribal altruism the best of them bring the others wherever they go. Filth and genius. You don't think Hitler would have made so much of the Jews if he thought they were consistently inferior!"

"But it's not the race so much as their gospel of altruism, disguised as Christianity. The world just can't afford it! Billions of inferior breeders, nurtured by their betters. Physical and mental defectives!" Hartmann saw Alison's hostility and forced a bitter smile. "Alas, I'm not 'politically correct.'"

"This muddle of genes and doctrines you've piled together—You aren't scientifically correct either."

"We shall see. The world had too many people in any case."

"*Had*," Alison repeated. "Isolation is playing tricks on you. You're fooling yourselves with fantasies of hate."

Hartmann and Pégoud looked at each other. "We have nothing to prove. In any case, we're in the rescue phase now. After a few years of quarantine the human species must grow from places like this. You must contribute."

"Not if I can do anything about it," Alison answered.

Hartmann raised his eyes to the clock on the wall. He sighed. "I've had enough clashing of wills to last a lifetime. It makes for a noisy sort of drama, but the thing is to *push your will through!* To *do!*" Pégoud, try the radio again. Maybe we'll get the BBC."

Pégoud searched the shortwave bands. Among scattered items was news of a plague spreading far from Le Mans: Paris, Reims, Limoges, Dijon, Metz, Southampton, Utrecht, Osnabruck. The countries of the European Community had closed their borders to each other.

Alison looked at how Hartmann nodded, and saw the satisfaction on his ancient face. She'd added muscle to her large frame these last months. Possibly she outweighed him. Pégoud was still distracted by the radio. She lurched out of her chair, falling across table and man, smashing Hartmann back against the wall.

Pégoud turned, his reflexes slowed by age, and maybe his wits too. He grabbed at her arms and hair. His calloused hands seemed barely human. She kicked and stood, forcing him off balance, and he fell with a clatter. The moment played like a stuck record: for an eternal instant the two men lay floored and in each other's way. *Do something!* Her hands still cuffed, Alison picked up the rifle by the galley-passage and aimed it at them.

They froze. She turned and hurried out toward the deck. Cold rain beat hard against her. The tide was up. Frigid seawater swirled at the base of the ship's ladder. Alison threw the weapon over the rail, and started down.

She might have died, but the current washed her shoreward. It wasn't far before she could wade. Teeth chattering, she made her way toward the dark cliffs she'd climbed down just this afternoon. Her need to tell Henri and the others about today's events kept her going like an automaton, long after shakes and exhaustion.

Alison kept the rifle trained on the more distant of the two white flags. From behind this high barricade of rocks, she controlled the entire midsection of Val Stuter, the natural passage between free Peninsula Courbet and the rest of Kerguelen.

Her younger husband was down there, a dark speck in his deerskins. The Hartmannites had arranged this parley, and Leo wanted to know what they were so keen to tell them.

"Peace? I don't see how," Alison had told him earlier this morning. "They want peace *after* their crimes, when they should go to jail! So does any criminal!" She looked to Henri for support, but her number one husband just plucked up a bucket, and went out to milk the reindeer.

For a couple minutes the two flags stood together, and then separated. Alison waited impatiently, and poked out her head when he was halfway up the ridge.

Leo shouted, and she caught one word: "*—dead!*" He climbed another minute. "*They're willing to deliver the corpses. They're both dead; it's young Charles who told me.*"

"Who?"

"Hartmann and Pégoud."

"Dead at the same time? It smacks of carelessness."

Leo shrugged. He rolled over the rock barricade and caught his breath. "They want the war to end. There's nothing to fight about anymore. Life's hard enough."

"What about the boat? Hartmann's yacht. How do we get away from this forsaken hole unless we control the yacht?"

Leo shook his head. "Let's talk about it tonight at the meeting."

"Leo," Alison said dangerously.

"They don't want to hand it over. They say we'll use it to break quarantine. It hasn't been five years yet. Barely half that."

"And so Hartmann's *policies* survive, whether he's dead or not."

Leo looked up. "You're a hard woman. Remember Radio Iceland? A year ago they decided to take a chance and let in refugees, and now—silence. Who knows his weapon better than the murderer who used it?"

"There may be other reasons why radios leave the air," Alison said. Had anyone heard her satellite-boosted transmissions, back in the days before her batteries went permanently flat? Had they heard Henri? Did the world know who to blame for five billion deaths? Was *anyone* left alive out there?

"But not pleasant ones," Leo answered. "So anyway, we get the bodies as proof, and set up a market in the neutral zone for exchanging food and goods. No alcohol. Everyone stays sober, and no guns inside the perimeter. We'll be able to get the coal we need. They even talked about making a treaty, with formal borders."

Alison patted her round belly. "How many weather-kids in the new generation? Maybe three? Five? Rumor has it *every woman* on the colony side is pregnant. The treaty will last until we're old and decrepit, no longer."

"We won't be here by then. We'll be in Australia." No one argued that. It was the safest place to aim for, westerly winds and currents all the way.

"I don't think so." Alison nodded toward the enemy west. "They'll use that yacht to scout, and fetch home a larger ship to convoy their people. *Their* people, not us. God, I hate this! How could Hartmann take such a risk? Our hopes ride on *one lousy yacht*, in seas as rough as any in the world! Even if I were on their side, I'd hate it."

"A lot of them *did* hate Hartmann," Leo answered. "The women, certainly, and some of the men. It will be a tragedy if another bullet is fired in anger."

1999

In the end it was settled by lottery. Men would crew the yacht; men who had fathered at least one child, three from the colonists, two from the meteorologist side. The lottery took Henri away from Alison, and she wept through the dark and stormy afternoon.

Five women mourned together, and for a moment their differences were forgotten.

The yacht broadcast messages to the limit of its range, less than two days out. Henri worked the equipment, and his was the last voice anyone heard, typically calm and cheerful.

The islanders waited month after month. Christmas was bitter, and New Year's Day a mockery. The winds blew on, wet and cold over great mountainous seas. Whales spouted in Baie Accessible, and mated, and penguins sheltered their eggs along the rocky shores.

Life went on. Alison and Leo took the twins with them, to herd the reindeer up the plateau, across the forgotten boundaries of war. The world had been thick with purpose, and now—nothing. Nature didn't need a reason to continue, and it began to sink in: Alison realized that people didn't either.

But such a mute, crude existence! *I don't dare talk God, or philosophy, to my kids*, she thought. The island community was knit together by such feeble sympathies that an intellectual argument could pull it apart, and start new wars.

She thought of her own childhood, and smiled. *It wasn't as if we debated great issues at the Dairy Queen.*

"What's this, Mama?" Jeanan struggled to unearth a glassy blue stone from the beaten ground.

Alison bent to help him. "It's too heavy to carry," she said. "We'll be back. Leave it; it isn't going anywhere." "It feels funny."

"Waxy. I wonder if this is flint. Some kind of igneous glassy something. I wish I'd learned some geology." She went on to talk of what she knew about the world and its layers, and its four billion years of life. To her grandchildren all this would be the stuff of myths. She swatted a doe to get it moving, and thought about Noah's ark.

God saw the sins of humankind, and made a great flood. He warned Noah and his family, and they built a ship. It took them to a mountaintop called Kerguelen, and here we wait for the waters to recede.

It made a good story, and someone other than her could put in a twist of hope. *God promised someday to drain the lands, when we're ready for his purposes. So be good, kiddies, and mind your parents! Mind the priests, too, who tell you how many seals you can afford to kill, and how many eggs to take in season.*

Oh God, Alison prayed. Is it really going to go on like this? It was better to fall extinct than to play the old games again, over and over, in claustrophobic miniature.

2031

Hugh lugged the bluestone to his smithy by the coal mines. Here he shaped old drumlins into arrowheads, and sharpened them for barter. Here too he used his precious iron tools to chip and carve, seeing in the rock the shapes of his own heavy wife and daughters—good and beautiful women, not shivers like the skinny ones.

His friend Jean came one day with a bundle of fresh skins to offer in trade. He bent to look. "I know that stone. I know where you took it from."

"Can you get me some more?" Hugh asked. He spoke softly, shy about his workmanship and the nudity of his figures, but proud as well, and pleased at the way Jean admired them.

Jean shook his head. A rugged man in his thirties, his hair was turning prematurely white—a family trait. "Ask the hunters. They range farther than I do with my herd."

Hugh nodded. "When I finish, I'll put the stone back where it came from, only with a base beneath so people can see it better."

"And I'll make a little tent over these girls, yes?" Jean volunteered. His eyes twinkled. "Otherwise they'll get cold."

"Not these ones. They're elephant seal women. They're made for this climate." *What an odd conversation*, Hugh thought, listening to himself.

Two weeks later he and Jean got together to dedicate a little . . . shrine. If Kerguelen Island had a crossroads, this would be the place, and now wanderers had something to talk about.

Mystery added to mystery. Someone brought a bouquet of flowers. Someone else painted the base rock red; a compound of rust and blood and oil that did not wash away in the rain.

A few nights later, Hugh's scandalized wife and daughters came and carried off the stone. After a day's trek they buried it near the glacier. Months passed before a hunter found a patch of torn earth, and restored the Goddesses to their shrine.

2053

Twenty-two years later the Man of the Bible set up his altar a hundred meters from the Harlot Stones and preached. "God will send us a ship. Trust him, and we'll sail from the four corners of Kerguelen, to the four corners of the greater world!"

"What happens when that book of yours turns to mush?" Old Jean asked. He passed this way twice a year, collecting the strays from his son's herd. For the moment he was a congregation of one. The Man of the Bible did not require large audiences, and sometimes he ranted to the winds alone.

"God would not leave us without his testament! Yes, that's why I say just a few more years! Arraign yourselves in clean garments of the soul, for the time is nigh upon us!"

"Read it. Read the words. Can you?" Jean was barely literate, the despair of his mother when Alison had been alive, and he found it wonderful that anyone could read aloud at a conversational pace.

The Man of the Bible smiled, and closed his eyes, and let the tattered book fall open. He looked, hoping for an oracle, and intoned the words: "Proverbs, chapter eleven: *Where no counsel is, the people fall: but in the multitude of counsellors there is safety. Righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin is a reproach to any people. The king's wrath is as the roaring of a lion: but his favor is as dew upon the grass.*"

"And who is this king?"

The Man of the Bible looked around. "A king? What do you mean?"

"Does the Bible say we should have a king?"

The Man of the Bible pondered. "A good king, yes." He didn't much like this sense of being *led*, like some poor dumb reindeer. "A bad king, no. There—see those idols? They're the test. A good king will throw them down."

"They're just sculptures," Jean said. "I saw them being made. The first ones, anyhow."

"They're obscene. God will not save us until they're thrown into the sea!"

"Why don't you try it?" Jean's grin was half a threat, as were his words.

"They'd know it was me," admitted the Man of the Bible. "They'd hate me for it, and anyhow, it's not *my* test. Let a man stand forth who dares to be the good king God asks for. This will be his first proving mission; to rally the people and get rid of all pagan follies."

Jean spoke about the Man of the Bible when he reached his son's summer camp late that afternoon. Roland frowned as he held the tent flap open for him. "Do you think many people listen to him?"

"Not to him. But when he reads his Bible, the words are wise and eloquent. Now that there are hundreds of us, perhaps we should have someone—someone elected to rule. Not someone who throws sculptures into the sea. If we're the last human beings left on Earth, then those bluestones are the only works humanity has accomplished in my whole lifetime."

Roland nodded. "A king should move among his people, to witness their needs, just like a herdsman. He should be regular in his passages, so he can be found. He should have strong allies to enforce his justice, like my uncles and brothers."

Jean sat at the fire, and threw a dried chip on the

blaze. The heat took some of the ache out of his joints. "What about those harlot Goddesses?"

Roland screwed up his face in thought. "We could hide them like Hugh's wife did, up near the glacier. We could take them high and build a rock hut around them, with a single door. Carnot's daughter is a cripple, but she could sit guard and keep people out. It could seem like an honor to the Goddesses: a temple and a priestess. We'll explain it that way to some people, and the opposite way to others—in fact we're *discouraging* pagan worship."

Jean shook his head. "You're not the king the Man of the Bible is looking for."

"No," Roland agreed. "But I'm the king he's going to get, if *anyone* is." Instead of sitting at the fire, he turned to go out. "I'll send to Port-aux-Français, and tell the old men that they've got a candidate. Work with me on this. Think up some good words. I want to be polite, but I want their answer before we drive the herd east in the fall, and if my message—well, if it carries a hidden threat to use my *power* . . ."

Jean grinned, and Roland smiled back. "Grandmama was a great woman, no? And so we grow from her. Perhaps we'll do credit to her memory."

2110–2125

The battle was lost. The People of God fled at low tide, carrying all their belongings across the strait to Île Foché.

It was a horrible refuge, with a thin fringe of vegetation around the shores, then heights, and a shrinking glacier inland. The People trapped all the rabbits there were, and kept them in cages, but in the end they had to eat them.

They fished. At low tide they combed the strand for *anything*; kelp and tube-worms and dead birds. The Bluestoners forbade all trade for leather or metal, and to save their clothes, half the time the People went naked.

The ocean was four-minute water—wading for food, the People held their breaths, because they had no other way of measuring such lengths of time. The old ones said that after four minutes, one got cramps and died, but it wasn't quite true: they could wade for *two* long breaths before coming to shore to dance the slapdance.

Some of the People spoke of trying for a length of *three*. Those who succeeded proposed furtive swims to new outer islands. Others said they should abandon this hellish life and apologize to the Bluestoners for their crimes against the Goddesses.

One of them described something she'd seen: a new boat made of seal hide, ribbed with whalebones. If the Bluestoners could make boats, Île Foché was nowhere safe along its coasts.

"We could make our own boats," a young man said.

"We must be careful not to kill our few seals like we did the rabbits," one of the mothers responded. "As it is, we aren't quiet near their breeding grounds. They don't come like before. Not many, anyhow."

The People voted. Boats were for Bluestoners, and

they would waste. It was a vote for death by hunger and exposure. If there'd been any disease on Kerguelen, a variant cold virus from the outside world to weaken them further, the People would have been gone in one generation.

In the history of life on Earth, stupid choices make all the difference. Afterward, they may not even seem stupid. The few who survived the decade found Île Foch no longer cramped, and with longer foraging—three and four held breaths—they scrounged more food.

Given a mere trifle of surplus nourishment, they put on layers of protective fat. "We're evolving, aren't we?" little Claire asked.

Mama looked at her sharply; this thick-limbed barrel of a child with her porcelain skin, and white-blond hair. "The way we brag about ourselves—that's what's evolving. No, what I've taught you applies to rabbits and reindeer, not to us. Don't add or change my words, just pass them down, or we won't have any science left at all when God comes to take us home."

Mama was of the biology lineage. Old Louis had been born a smith and so he taught atomic theory; stuff about chemistry, and electrons, and a song that began *hydrogen belium lithium*. Jules taught theology, chanting verses from the Lost Bible. These were all they remembered—barely three sciences. The Bluestoners had seven, including meteorology, history, engineering, geology and navigation. It was to be expected. There were more of them—maybe a thousand. Maybe two thousand.

From his cairn-pedestal the beachmaster waved and Bernice stood to take her turn in the cold sea. She patted Claire on the head, but her heart was filled with gloom. God would never come until two thousand Bluestoners repented of idolatry, and Jules wasn't the man he used to be, nor even a good teacher. It was the end of hope. The People of God would be trapped here for eternity.

2138

Claire stood with Elsa and Marie, stolidly watching Pierre's funeral. Old Bernice wept as Rollo officiated, reciting the God-words. Pierre was the last of his generation of men. An era was over, and a new age had begun. Not counting a few small children, there were only two other males among the People, boys younger than Rollo, and no threat to his supremacy.

Claire nursed few illusions. Rollo was beachmaster now, and gave the orders. "Ashes to ashes, and dust to dust," he intoned, and threw a handful of pea-gravel over Pierre's sunken body. He nodded to the three young women. "Take him up inland. Pile rocks on top."

They lumbered forward in the rain, and grabbed, and dragged. The work was difficult and made them puff. After a hundred meters of uphill climbing, they took a rest break.

"Rollo hates me," Marie muttered. "See how he uses us? We're pig-women, good only for the dirty work!"

"I forage farther than anyone, and stay in the water

longer," Claire said. "But he'd sooner hump around with the likes of Jeanette."

Elsa snorted. "The way she squeals when the cold waves hit!" She slapped her broad flank. "—But we're too *fat* for him!"

Rollo hardly needed a name. Who could confuse him with anyone else? He very nearly *owned* the male pronoun. "They say the Bluestoners have plenty of men," Marie spoke. "They haven't all died of the shaking ague."

"Life is easy for Bluestoners. Easy enough even for delicate men!" Elsa said. She reached and gave Pierre's arm a tug. The whole corpse moved: it couldn't weigh more than sixty kilos.

"We could leave this island and join them," Marie suggested. "How many times have I suggested it? What do we have here? A God who doesn't come to rescue us. The Bluestoners build boats. Maybe someday they'll sail to Australia."

Claire shook her head. "The Bluestoners would kill us. We're enemies. We don't wear clothes. Old Jules said it's a sin—"

"He said a lot of things that weren't true. He made himself believe anything. Remember how he went crazy before he died, and said Louis was Satan, and told Rollo to kill him?" Elsa stood, and the others followed. They carried Pierre's body another hundred meters, up beyond the last of the grasses.

The rain grew colder. During their second rest break they huddled with their wide backs to the west wind. Elsa spoke again. "Rollo has too many women. With forty to choose from, he'll never give us children. We'll just do the work, and bring food for others to eat."

"Let's go to the Bluestoners, then," Marie said decisively. "Remember what Louise told me? The Bluestoners in the boat who yelled at her? They wanted to have sex. She said they *wiggled* at her."

Claire hipped sideways, bumping the others. "Stop it," Elsa complained.

"See how stupid it is? Stupid and gross. I think we aren't pretty, not to Rollo, or Bluestoners either."

"There are other islands," Elsa answered.

"What difference does that make?" Claire asked.

"We could find an empty island for the three of us," Elsa went on. "Eat all our own food. Keep together, in case a Bluestoner boat comes along. And if the men are friendly, well . . ."

"Then we have babies," Marie answered, smiling as she twisted her dripping hair into a rope between her breasts.

"It's one more short hike to the graves," Claire said. Together they dragged Pierre's body. They reached a stony field, intermittent with cairns, and threw stones at a pair of wild dogs.

"They'll just dig him up again," Elsa said.

"Not if we pile the stones high enough." Marie shook her head. "When we leave, let this be proof that the People of God lost their hardest workers."

They worked through the afternoon, and trudged back down to shore. The afternoon soup had already been

served out, and all the meaty bits were gone. What was left was thin and watery. When Claire complained, the cook snapped back. Rollo glared from his beachmaster pedestal, as if to command silence.

Elsa stomped up to his elevated feet. "You should see we're treated better, if you expect us to do jobs for you!"

"A little less food might be good for you," Rollo answered, eyeing her large torso offensively.

For once Elsa held her tongue. What was the use? Later that evening, she and Claire and Marie got together. "We can wade and swim to Presq'île Joffre. The Bluestoners hunt there, but we'll be safe working up the beach in the dark. There's an island off Joffre we can reach. The second crossing won't be harder than the first."

"How do you know this?" Claire asked.

"I even know its name. Île Bethell! When I was a child I was forever listening to old folks talk of islands and hopes, but they weren't the swimmers *we* are."

"I have to say goodbye to Mama," Claire said. "I guess I'm converted."

"We'll live for ourselves, and wiggle at Bluestoners when we want another baby!" Marie added enthusiastically.

"Say goodbye," Elsa grudging, ignoring her companion's tasteless remarks. "But don't waste all night doing it."

Rollo, Jeanette and Paula lay in a warm huddle behind an earthbreak, protected from the night rains by a seal-skin roof—until someone opened the flap, and a wet gust hit his face. "What? Go away!"

"Bernice has something to report," the night watchwoman said. "It's about her daughter and two others. They've left the People. They're going to their own island."

"They can't do that! Claire and who else?"

"Marie and Elsa."

Rollo laughed. "Those tubs won't get far. Come with me. Jeanette, you too." He spanked her on the butt. "Wake up. We've got to organize a force to bring them back."

"Why?" Jeanette mumbled the question, not yet quite awake, rubbing herself where it stung.

"If everyone I boss around runs off instead of working, where would we be? Tell me that!" Rollo puffed into anger at the thought, convinced by his own words. "Shirkers! Come on then!"

He stood and hurried through the beach-camp. "Wake up! Emergency! Come on!" Turning, he saw Bernice. "Which way did they go?"

"Inland. Across. Toward the strait to Presq'île Joffre." Her voice was rough with weeping.

"It's very dark," some woman complained, an anonymous shadow standing behind some others. They were a crowd now.

Rollo shook his head. "They won't move fast. We can catch them."

"What about the wild dogs?"

"Huh! Starved and scared of us. Okay, we leave ten behind to guard the children. You older ones."

"I think you should let them go. You never liked them."

Rollo knew the speaker—there were no unknowns in

his life. What gave him a sense of vertigo, of strangeness, was the way others joined in, muttering their agreement. Something was being created here: a multiwoman *thing* dangerous to his power.

"Damn it! I give the orders. You come, or else!"

"It isn't right." Rollo grinned now, because the woman spoke these words tremulously, in obvious terror. But she spoke anyhow. "A man keeps a woman, or he doesn't. It isn't for his other women to help him."

"Yes." "This is *your* business." "It's for men."

"It's for the People, and God," Rollo argued. "Not just for me. Hell, I don't even *like* them!"

"We'll come with you!"

Rollo squinted down as young Charles stepped forward, tugging Jacques by the hand. "Poof," he said. "You'll stay here. I'll tag those I want. You. You. And you."

He went through the crowd. "Now we've wasted enough time. Follow me."

Twenty women trailed Rollo as he began climbing inland. He led them quickly, urging haste, and found himself well in front. After a time he took a break, waiting for the rest to catch up.

His shins and toes were battered by dark stumbling, and he cursed the three escapees. "Where are the others?" he asked Paula when she puffed into view.

She looked behind her, squinting into the nocturnal drizzle. "Maybe they got lost."

After another wait he recollected five women, and swore: "At this rate we're no faster than those pigs we're after!"

He was in the lead again by the time they reached the cairn-field. Somewhere they heard the yap and growl of dogs; two or three—or maybe more.

Angry dogs, but not dogs in chase—that was a *different* noise. No, these dogs worried in circles around some difficulty, or fed jealously, half-spooked by each other. It was odd how easily one could read meaning into their cries: They were not contented animals. Paula caught at Jeanette's arm. She nodded toward the noise. "They're digging after Pierre!"

"*Rollo!*" Jeanette whispered. "Stop here! It's dangerous. We can't see anyhow."

"Stay together," he answered. "They won't attack a group."

"Then let's wait for the others."

"No."

"Don't be an idiot!" But these whispers had reached the dogs, who fell suddenly silent. "Jesus!" Paula gasped. "Let's get back!"

"*Damn you!*" Rollo picked up a rock. "A couple of scrawny runts, and you run away! Fine! Just fine! I'll handle this *myself*!"

Moments later he was lost in the dark. The women returned to camp, collecting others on their way. No one slept easily, and those who gave up joined a mostly silent circle around the cooking-fire. After some time the skies grew gray with dawn and Rollo stumbled down onto the beach, his face ashen. Without a word he took his bowl of breakfast stew, and went to sit high atop his beachmaster's pedestal.

Thirty women watched, then went about their business. Rollo sulked quietly all day. That evening the cook led a delegation. "We've talked it over. Tonight you sleep with Angelique and Therese."

"I'll sleep with whomever I choose," Rollo answered.

"I think not. Not anymore."

Somewhere to the east, a Bluestoner hide-boat beached on the rocky shores of Île Bethell, and Marie stepped out to join her two friends. "Thank you," she said to the man.

He answered in his strange accent. "You're welcome. I'm glad I could help. You'll be okay here?" He grinned at the yearning on her face.

"Once we make a fire."

"I could bring hot coals in a pot," the man offered.

"You are so kind. What could we do to repay you?"

Marie almost stumbled on the words. They had a ritual quality, fated to be spoken exactly so.

"I'll come up with something," the Bluestoner promised. "I'll be back."

After he left, the three women exchanged glances. "We're so big now. I wonder what we'll look like when we're all pregnant?" Claire giggled.

"What thoughts you think!" Elsa threw herself down onto the higher gravel behind the tide line. "I'm going to get some sleep."

The man came back much later that day. Claire had collected chips and flotsam for a fire, and she and Elsa got it going. They wove a windbreak of beach bones and wild cabbage leaves to shield it from gusts of rain. After his hour with Marie, Andre came and squatted. He introduced himself and muttered wryly about his "wife." Claire pretended to know what he meant, though the word was unfamiliar.

"You'll be bored here," Andre speculated. Sometimes his eyes were merry, and sometimes thoughtful. "Do you play chess? But no—it uses engraved bluestones. That would be against you . . . uh . . ."

"Religion?" Elsa shrugged.

"You could use rocks," he went on. "As long as you can identify them by color and size, that is. Here, let me show you the rules. We'll draw a board in the gravel."

His first efforts were clumsy. He returned a couple days later to perform "gallantries" with Claire, and tried again: by this time the women had collected potential game tokens and given them names. "This is no good," Marie complained halfway through the lesson. "Only two of us get to play at a time."

They experimented during his next absence. When Andre came to dally with Elsa, they pestered him with questions, and then argued: Some of the rules were too eccentric to tolerate. Obviously their version would have a six-sided chessboard and three sets of pieces, and that was complex enough without *en passant* and castling.

Time passed. Food was abundant in the waters around Île Bethell. The women grew larger in their prosperity, and clumsy with high-bellied pregnancy. Yet they labored out hexagrams over a flat area of turf during many months, and found better and better chess pieces. Andre

brought contraband gifts: thongs and feather-fetishes, and paints. They rewarded him, and life was happy. There was a richness to their strategies that more than made up for the God they'd left behind.

2140

Marie lost one of her twins in childbirth, and the other was sickly for several months, so sickly she was reluctant to give it a name. Elsa found her own labor traumatic, though young Bernard was perfectly fat and healthy. Claire's little Julie was healthy too, and came out easily. Claire was the first to become pregnant again.

Andre showed up every ten days or so, and the women were puzzled when twice that time went by without a visit—long enough for four leisurely chess games. Then Marie saw his boat bobbing up the Joffre coastline.

He'd aged these weeks, and stood aside like an old man to let the women drag his boat up onto the high beach: "I got an ague. I'm barely better now. It happens when strangers land on isolated islands. I may bring it to you. Be careful, but don't worry too much. Everyone I know has lived through it."

"Strangers?" Elsa asked.

Andre held his arms wide. "From the *world*! The great outside! We could never sail there without a ship, and our legends said they were all dead. Umar is proof that we were wrong!"

"Umar? What name is that?" Marie asked. "Is he from God?"

Andre shook his head. "He's visiting everyone. He'll visit you too, after Île Foché. We can be rescued off Kerguelen, to warmer places. That's the good news, but there's bad too. He's a good man, and he doesn't like it. He doesn't like what he has to say—"

"Tell us!" Claire insisted, while Marie asked: "Are you going to leave?"

Andre nodded. "I've had my children. But the world . . . the world . . ." He scratched his hairy chin in puzzlement. "There was a disease that destroyed everything. We call it the Loss, or the Flood, or God's Abandonment. Umar says it came from here. It even came from us! There was an evil man called *Haretmon Peggo*. Peggo did it, and Peggo's blood runs in us. We have the skin and eyes and hair that proves it. We are Peggo's children, and since Peggo destroyed the world to make room for his children, he must not achieve his goals."

Andre shrugged. "So we can be saved, if we agree to have things done so those who leave Kerguelen can't have more babies, never at all. When Umar comes here, he'll show you *movies*, and you'll learn more. It seems possible, and even easy."

"Why would we want to go away?" Claire asked. She clutched little Julie to herself and waved her free arm at the island around her. "We have all this. We have each other."

"And soon you may have trees!" Andre said. "Big plants that grow fuel for fires! Umar says Kerguelen is warmer than in Peggo's time, and he brought seeds. But

once you see his movies—ah! This is hard country, and the worst of places. You'll find out!"

Umar came to Île Bethell many weeks later in a growling boat made of strange hard stuff, Andre sitting small at his side. The women gazed in awe: he was tall, black, and grave. After stepping ashore, he bowed to them. "The three heroines!"

Andre translated his words, though what Umar spoke was nearly intelligible, every word bent the same way out of true so Claire quickly caught the trick of it.

Elsa quirked her head. "Why do you say that?"

Umar pointed west to the dim heights of Île Foche far across the strait. "You overthrew the power of Rollo by running away. I'm not sure I understand *how*. Some manhood thing, and he lost face by not catching you."

Umar paused while Andre translated. He seemed impressed at the sight of them, enough so they felt their nakedness, in stark contrast to his heavy gray robes. "Andre says he's told you my bad news. The ship I came on doesn't belong to me. It belongs to my government, and I'm to tell you what the Comoran Empire has planned for you."

"Because of evil *Peggo*?"

Umar nodded. "You have good blood as well as bad—excuse me. The world died for this myth of blood, and now my people prove they still believe in it. They forgive you, and they invite you to the bounties of vast open lands like Europe and America, but not because you are innocent of an ancestor's crimes. No, they forgive you for the sake of a mythical fraction of ancestry that might be Alison's, and then they turn around and damn you again."

Umar strode inland a few steps, craning forward. At his first sight of the game-field he turned back. "Big groups of people are always stupid. Something is lost in numbers. I should not have come to Kerguelen under these restrictions, but I thought of you all, living with the thought that the wide world was dead and gone."

"Tell us about the other places," Marie asked.

"I'll do that. I'll show you movies when it gets dark. Do you mind if I look at that?" Umar pointed at the hexagons, and a complex array of painted and feathered rocks.

Elsa explained the game. Umar nodded in fascination. "You have this. You may not want to leave it," he said. "So far, only six hundred people have decided to take ship to Africa, and then Europe."

"Including Andre?" Claire asked.

Andre nodded. "I want to see . . ."

"Who will father our next children?" Marie interrupted. "We like you, Andre. We don't like most men."

"We won't have any children if we go away," Elsa reminded her companion.

"I wish things were like they were. Life without Andre . . . I wish you'd never come here," Marie scolded Umar. Her voice broke. "We were happy for a little short time in our lives."

"You'll replace him," Claire said. Everyone turned and looked at her.

"Oddly, you may be right," Umar agreed. "Thanks to my own princely blood, I'm the man my government has put in charge, and if I decide Kerguelen needs my ongoing attention . . ." He tightened his mouth into an almost humorless grin. "What are you setting out to do here? Start a new civilization? You're pretty early at it, aren't you?"

Claire looked puzzled. "This is our place, that's all."

"I'd do a master's dissertation on this game. It has enough to beguile my committee, until they learn it's only two years old." As Umar spoke, his voice dwindled. By the end he was talking only to himself. He woke to the group around him. "Sorry. It would be a privilege to take Andre's place among you formidable women. Now I'm going to show you a few things, starting with this tape recorder. . . ."

That night after the movies, the three women spoke among themselves. "Six hundred fewer people. More room for us."

"More food."

"If we get pregnant with Umar's kids, and they turn out skinny like him—no good for swimming—"

"Who can say? Then they go with him, back to the hot countries."

"They'd have to get that operation."

"I wonder. I wonder if it works that way."

"If Umar's children stay with us, half our kids will be less related to the other half. I mean—"

"If we start our own civilization?" Elsa chuckled in the dark. Twelve hours ago she hadn't known what the word meant. She still wasn't completely sure. All she knew was, she was going to try.

Their kids squirmed contentedly among the hills and valleys of triple motherhood. "I'm glad we've all decided to stay," Claire muttered. No one had yet declared herself, but she understood many things that went unsaid, and the silence afterward made it certain. ♦

Worldbuilding 101

Stephen L. Gillett

What makes a planet? Stir together rock and metal—seasoned with a little air and water, for a planet like the Earth—and simmer it for a few eons.

But where does the rock and metal come from? Those (mostly) supernova-forged elements I talked about in last month's column. The elements react with each other and segregate ("fractionate") according to their physical and chemical properties. And such chemical processing, especially when continued over geologic time, is vital for worldbuilding. Even a fairly rare element can end up common in a planetary environment if its chemical properties are such that natural processes tend to concentrate it.

In fact, such fractionation makes interesting planets possible in the first place. After all, hydrogen and helium together make up over 99% of the Universe. If nature couldn't fractionate out the heavier elements very effectively indeed, we'd never make a rocky world like Earth, Mars, or the Moon. Only gas giants, aborted stars like Jupiter or Saturn, would be possible. And sure, they may be interesting places to visit, but you *wouldn't* want to live there!

So let's look at the chemical processing that raw planet-stuff undergoes as a planetary system condenses out of a nebula of interstellar gas. Geochemists talk about four basic classes of chemical elements, depending on the elements' behavior: lithophile, chalcophile, siderophile, and

volatile (or "atmophile"). These classes are set by the behavior of the chemical compounds the most common elements enter into.

To take the last category first, volatiles (or "atmophile," meaning "atmosphere-loving") are all the low-melting-point, low-boiling-point things that are liquids or gases even at room temperature. Hydrogen and helium obviously make up most of the atmophiles, but they also include the heavy noble gases: neon, argon, and so on. Nitrogen is also largely volatile, both because it's a gas and because it combines with hydrogen to make ammonia (NH_3). Carbon and oxygen are also partly atmophile, because they make gaseous compounds such as methane (CH_4), carbon dioxide, and water.

As you might guess, the fact that hydrogen and helium are gases even at very low temperatures is what lets nature separate out the much smaller amounts of heavy elements from them. In the inner Solar System, for example, where the rocky planets Mercury, Venus, Earth, and Mars formed, conditions were always too hot for the volatile elements to condense out in a big way. That happened only in the cold outer System.

The other geochemical categories are more interesting, at least for us solid-world chauvinists, because they apply to elements that make solid compounds at room temperature.

For example, lithophile (Greek, "rock-loving") elements make up rocks, just as you might expect from

the name. The minerals that make up rocks are largely oxides or silicates, which are just compounds of silicon and oxygen with other elements. Since oxygen's the third most abundant element in the Universe after hydrogen and helium (it's a very distant third, to be sure!), its chemical properties determine what elements are lithophile: Lithophiles are all the elements that react enthusiastically with oxygen. We could even call these elements "oxyphiles" instead.

Lithophile elements include silicon, magnesium, calcium, aluminum, sodium, potassium, and many rarer metals. Some of the rare lithophile elements, such as uranium, are familiar, whereas others, like the so-called "rare earth elements," are hardly household words. (As we saw, though, oxygen itself is also partly atmophile, because it makes a low-boiling-point compound with hydrogen: water! So some of the oxygen gets lost with the volatiles. Of course, uncombined or "free" oxygen is also atmophile; look at our atmosphere! But free oxygen is a product of life. Left to itself, oxygen enthusiastically combines with other elements—it doesn't stay free. Even now, nearly all Earth's oxygen is locked away in its rocks. Only a smidgen resides in our atmosphere.)

Oxygen is so abundant because of a quirk of nuclear physics: oxygen's most common isotope, O-16, has an exceptionally stable nucleus. Hence, nucleosynthesis makes a lot

of it—and that has an absolutely profound effect on planetary chemistry.

Chalcophile (“sulfur-loving”) elements readily combine with sulfur, which although much rarer than oxygen is still more abundant than many metallic elements. Chalcophiles include metals like mercury, lead and zinc, and also the other “chalcogenides” (elements like sulfur in the Periodic Table) such as selenium and tellurium. (As with oxygen, though, the chalcogenides themselves are also partly amphiphile, because they make gaseous compounds like hydrogen sulfide, H_2S .)

Finally, siderophile (“iron-loving”) elements readily react with metallic iron. After all the reactions with oxygen and sulfur are done, there’s still iron left over. Because iron’s at the peak of the nuclear stability curve, it’s also pretty abundant as heavy elements go. This metallic iron dissolves other metals that were also largely left over: cobalt, nickel, and copper, and also precious metals such as gold, iridium, and platinum. (Precious metals are especially unreactive, so it’s not surprising they’re left over.)

Of course, as I’ve indicated these classes aren’t hard and fast; nothing ever is. I mentioned how sulfur and oxygen both have some volatile character, for example, despite their determining what the lithophile and volatile elements are. Iron too is multifaceted: it has both lithophile and chalcophile character, even though it gave its name to the siderophile elements. (Iron’s partial lithophile character has a major implication for Earthlike worlds, as I’ll discuss below.) But nonetheless, the classes are useful. Think of them as general tendencies for different elements.

Now, consider what happens when you gather a planet-sized mass of heavy elements together. The protoplanet heats up, partly from the heat released by natural radioactivity, and partly just from released gravitational energy. So this happens, the siderophiles and chalcophiles sink to the center, simply because they’re heavier. That’s where the iron-rich core in a planet like Earth comes from.

The lithophiles float on top of the

core, the way molten slag floats on molten iron, to form a thick rocky mantle. Over geologic time, as the planet continues to further differentiate by such processes as lava formation and plate tectonics, a separate crust forms on top of the mantle. (You can think of the crust as “sweated out” of the mantle as the planet continues to stew while its internal heat slowly escapes.)

What does this mean for worldbuilding? Here’s one thing. Because of all this ongoing chemical separation, the planet’s crust becomes enriched in certain elements, such as sodium and potassium, that don’t fit well into the compact silicates of the planet’s mantle. (Such compact silicates are dominated by magnesium with some iron, so they’re often called “ferromagnesian” or “mafic” minerals. Magnesium and iron ions are about the same size, so you can mix’n’match them pretty freely in a mineral.)

Two of the elements that tend to get sweated out are uranium and thorium. A common misconception (Frederick Pohl made this error in *Jem*, for example) is that uranium and thorium end up in the core, because they’re heavy elements. Not so; they’re also extremely reactive elements, and they react enthusiastically with oxygen. So they end up with the lithophile fraction; that is, with the rocks. In fact, they get enriched in the crust.

Not just uranium and thorium get enriched, too. The ongoing stirring of a planet by volcanism and tectonics also enriches planetary crusts in lots of rare elements—all those elements for which the crust is a more chemically favorable environment. So a planet, because of its internal heat, is a giant chemical fractionating plant that can (given time!) separate rare elements out of a vast volume of common rock. Thus it’s premature to write off planets as sources of resources, as some space enthusiasts have done. It’s just not true that you can get *everything* more cheaply and easily from asteroids out in space!

Anyway, those are the basics. But what are some points of departure? First, I mentioned that iron, although it gave its name to the siderophile

elements, also has lithophile character. So, iron is common in the rocky part of the planet. Even in Earth’s crust, for example, it’s the fourth most common element.

And iron’s abundance has profound significance for whether a technical culture can arise, because—alone of the common crustal elements—iron can be smelted into metal with very primitive technology. You just heat up iron oxides, which are quite common as minerals, with carbon (charcoal or coal), and voila! Magnesium and aluminum are also abundant in the crust, but they’re very difficult to extract. You can’t do it with charcoal and a bellows, the way you can smelt iron!

To be sure, it’s more difficult to smelt iron than copper or tin, but iron is a *lot* more common. All the Bronze Age empires crashed with the discovery of iron, because weapons suddenly became cheap. (Bronze is an alloy of copper and tin.) Suddenly, every foot warrior could have his very own weaponry—and the fact that the iron weapons were not only cheaper but better than bronze just hastened the Bronze Age collapse. Of course, cheap iron later was useful for lots besides weapons—plows, nails, fasteners, wheels—and it led directly to the steel technology on which so much of the modern world is based. (Steels are simply iron alloys in which the proportion of dissolved carbon is low, and to which other metals have been added in controlled amounts.)

So an Iron Age would be stillborn if for some reason iron were rare on the surface of the Earth. In a number of stories, Poul Anderson has proposed that iron would be rare on older planets than the Earth, because heavy elements would have been rarer when those planets formed. As I noted last month, though, heavy elements up through iron seem to be made in pretty much the same ratios, so that the ratio of iron to (say) silicon would be just about what it is on the Earth.

There’s a different way to set up a low-iron world, though: start with a nebula a bit richer in carbon. Although the details are complicated, the result is that very little iron

ends up in the silicates, in the lithophile fraction. (The reason, basically, is that the oxygen combines with the carbon instead of with any iron.) Virtually all the iron, therefore, ends up in the siderophile or chalcophile fraction—and so *all* the iron ends up in the core. Although overall such a planet has as much iron as the Earth, none is in the crust where it's accessible. (Iron on such a planet would be like the siderophile metals cobalt and nickel on the Earth; nearly all is locked away the core. That's why cobalt and nickel are so rare that they're strategic metals. In the Earth as a whole, though, both those metals are pretty common.)

This didn't happen in our Solar System probably because we have an unusually high proportion of oxygen to carbon. Now, I mentioned above that oxygen-16 is very abundant. But carbon-12 is almost as abundant as oxygen, and making more oxygen-16 than carbon-12 takes a very hot supernova indeed. So for technical intelligence to have a chance, an large injection of freshly forged oxygen into the condensing nebula is required. . . .

Volatile abundances should be another fruitful source of variety. Obviously an Earthlike planet needs *some* volatiles, for it to have an atmosphere and oceans. But equally obviously, compared with the planet as a whole the volatiles are just a wisp. Only 0.024% of Earth's mass is ocean, for example.

So what about different atmospheres? It's been realized since the early 1950s that Earth's atmosphere can't just be left over from the solar nebula, because the noble gases—neon in particular—are so rare. In the Universe as a whole, neon is as abundant as carbon and almost as abundant as oxygen. And it's plenty heavy enough for Earth's gravity to keep it. But neon is very rare in our atmosphere: less than two atoms in every hundred thousand.

Evidently, therefore, our atmosphere comes from volatiles that could form chemical compounds. They may have been combined into the rocks that formed the Earth itself, and were "outgassed" when the Earth started to stew from its internal

heat. Or else they were in objects that originally condensed farther out, in the outer Solar System where conditions were colder, and slammed into the Earth during the late states of accretion. Either way, trifling variations could make a big difference in how much ocean an Earthlike planet ends up with.

Which could be very important. SF writer and scientist David Brin emphasizes that Earth may have an abnormally small ocean, which has made possible the evolution of technical intelligence. A Earthlike planet completely covered with water is probably a bad place for technical intelligence to arise, simply because fire and metal—the builder's blocks of technology—won't be available.

On the other hand, there *are* limits to what chemical fractionation can do. As I mentioned last month, for example, fluorine breathers aren't likely. Just from their chemical properties, you could imagine that free fluorine and hydrogen fluoride (HF) might make up an analog to oxygen and water. That is, HF would be a thallassogen—it would form oceans and lakes, and would be the solvent in which biochemical reactions occurred. Presumably plant life would release free fluorine during photosynthesis, while animals would breathe in fluorine instead of oxygen. The planet Niflheim in H. Beam Piper's *Uller Uprising* used just this setup.

Chemically it's just fine. However, fluorine's a very rare element. Although nucleosynthesis makes oxygen-16 abundantly, fluorine-19 (the only stable isotope of fluorine) is an out-of-the-way nucleus that's made only incidentally. For every fluorine atom, there are something over 15,000 oxygen atoms.

And on top of everything, fluorine is so chemically active that it's going to be very hard to accumulate it in an atmosphere. It's a better oxidizer than oxygen (that seems oxymoronic, but it's true), so free fluorine gas replaces oxygen out of its compounds—including silicates. In other words, if you start with fluorine gas and an oxide, you soon have oxygen gas and a fluoride instead.

So, with a ratio of one fluorine atom to 15,000 oxygen atoms, it's

going to be real hard to get rid of all the oxygen!

The vagaries of nucleosynthesis also make it hard to arrange alternative life chemistries. To be sure, it's quite possible that no element besides carbon can serve as the basis of life. But carbon is also an extremely common heavy element; as I mentioned, the isotope carbon-12 in particular is exceptionally stable, and so like oxygen-16 is made especially abundantly. So even if another element could form a basis for an alternative biochemistry, it's going to be hard to gather enough of it to try.

For example, boron is chemically similar to silicon, a favorite alternative life-element. Even more promising would be a combination of boron and nitrogen. Together these elements can act somewhat like carbon, because a boron-nitrogen chemical bond has the same electron structure as a carbon-carbon bond. Boron nitride, BN, for example, like carbon, has two crystal structures; one is like graphite, and the other is like diamond. (The latter is as hard as diamond, and is made commercially under the trade name Borazon.)

However, boron is an extremely rare element. Both stable isotopes (B-10 and B-11) have delicate nuclei. As I described last month, they're not even made in stars! They're knocked apart too easily. Only cosmic ray particles make a smidgen of boron, an atom at a time, by knocking particles off bigger atoms like nitrogen or oxygen. Thus, even if boron-based life is possible, it's hard to see how enough boron could be gathered together to try it.

But that's not to say that there won't be a lot of variety in our universe even so! In any event, although planets are complicated, we are beginning to understand how they work. And more than that, we are beginning to see how they might be formed differently.

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Beginning worldbuilding by a noted geochemist. ♦

To the Moon with Mr. V

Gregory Benford

Recently I had the unusual experience of reading two novels separated by 127 years in publication, both dealing with the Moon. Yet how alike they are, in an odd way.

I had been asked to write an introduction to a new translation of Jules Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon*. Arguably, this novel announced the invention of modern science fiction—stories with the scientific content foregrounded, as much a character as any person.

John Varley's *Steel Beach* is a rich sprawl of a novel, about five times longer than Verne's book and the latest word in the technophilia that Verne pioneered. And there are odd connections.

Verne wrote over a hundred "extraordinary voyage" novels, while Varley has fewer than five. Verne celebrated machines and admired engineers, yet gave us rapt descriptions of natural wonders. Listen as Varley's first-person, wisecracking point of view character, Hildy, views his world:

I took a deep breath and smelled freshly-poured concrete. I drank the sights and sounds and scents of a newborn world: the sharp primary colors of wire bundles sprouting from unfinished walls like the first buds on a bare bough, the untarnished gleam of copper, silver, gold, aluminum, titanium, the whistle of air through virgin ducts, undisturbed, unmuffled, bringing with it the crisp sharpness of the light ma-

chine oil that for centuries has coated new machinery, fresh from the factory . . . all these things had an effect on me. They meant warmth, security, safety from the eternal vacuum, the victory of humanity over the hostile forces that never slept. In a word, progress.

Witty, colorful, a jab at our present environmental sensitivities, a technophile's casual brushoff to uninspected naturalism.

This Moon is humanity's in a way that the Earth cannot be, for we made it. Indeed, Varley's future history (which he points out in an afterword isn't exactly compatible with this novel) turns about the armature of a great tragedy: aliens arrive, kick us off our planet, and we scavenge and scabble for a living throughout the rest of the solar system. We are a species forced out of our evolutionary niche, hurried along to our destiny, cast up on a steel beach of our own making.

And it's glorious. Varley has obviously spent a long while assembling this novel, and it shows some structural signs of that. The plot follows a deftly polished smartass "newspad" reporter, sprinting around his/her (yes, sex change as fashion statement) rapid-fire world.

Tech wonders sprout before the eye. Sudden, juicy, newsworthy events unfold, with Hildy always at the center. She hustles stories for her newspad, *The News Nipple*, in perpetual competition with *The Straight*

Sbit. It's A Year in the Lunar Life, with rather tenuous superstructure to keep one turning the pages.

Hildy has a nagging bit of a problem with suicide. Why this should be occupies much musing, much of it interesting, though without any profound conclusion. He/she passes the hundred-birthday mark, and we become aware that this person has accumulated strikingly few close emotional ties in all that time. Her intimates are fascinating, the best job Varley has ever done at secondary characterization—but there's plainly something seriously wrong with Hildy if these are all she has in her life.

This is broader, fresher ground for Varley. He burst upon our scene with crackling energy in the mid-1970s and has been working up to this fat novel ever since.

It's refreshing, not only in its meticulously thought-through technodazzle, but in its absolute confidence that we can save ourselves through our own crafts. I recalled several times Verne's offhand remark in *From the Earth to the Moon*: "The Yankees, the world's best mechanics, are engineers the way Italians are musicians and Germans are metaphysicians: by birth."

One could write a telling history of American sf over the last three decades titled "The Sons of Heinlein." From Alexei Panshin through Joe Haldeman to Varley and beyond, many of the most innovative of us have stood squarely in Heinlein's

shadow. Varley knows this and, as his novel darkens and wanders, he turns explicitly to what this tradition means in modern sf. The last third of the work circles around the Heinleiners, a small, self-selected elite who want to rebuild and launch the wrecked starship named for . . . guess who?

Varley is at his witty best when describing this band of malcontents: "A lot of ship's captains were Heinleiners, a lot of solitary miners. *None* of them were happy—possibly that type of person can never be happy—but at least they were away from the masses of humanity and less likely to get into trouble if offered an intolerable insult—like bad breath, or inappropriate laughter."

Still, Varley harbors few illusions about the celebrated can-do style. Their tech works, all right, but "it still had the look of Heinlein engineering, wherein nothing is ever any better than it has to be. Maybe if they get time to move beyond prototypes they'll get more elegant and more careful, but in the meantime it's 'Don't bend that wrench. Get a bigger hammer.' Heinleiner toolboxes must be filled with bubble gum and bubbly pins."

They brusquely advertise the familiar social libertarianism, too. (Yet how fresh it still seems, in a 1993 where we seem mired in the circular logics of the past.) Describing our age, the leader of the Heinleiners lectures: "Any drug that dulled the senses, or heightened them, or altered the consciousness in any way was viewed as sinful—except for the two most physically harmful drugs: alcohol and nicotine. Something relatively harmless, like heroin, was completely illegal, because it was addictive, as if alcohol was not. No one had the right to determine what he put into his own body, they had no medical bill of rights. Barbaric, agreed?"

And Hildy does agree, steeped in the tradition and ethos of hardnosed, crackerbarrel, hard sf.

Where did that spirit come from? The USA Midwest, surely—but also from France.

Varley's Moon as a steel beach descends straight from Verne's. He gives us an almost hallucinogenic

urban landscape, with cavernous bubbles devoted to immense feats of nostalgia: the Disneylands replicating Texas (where Varley grew up, well described here) and other lost Earthly paradises. But the restless, meandering energy of the novel is plainly seeking something.

We're more subtle now, of course. Urban preoccupations are the stuff of sitcoms and the soaps, no longer the province of Kafka and Camus. Thoughts of mortality and the world's passing wonders sit in the frontal lobes, but something's simmering in the back.

Consider Verne.

In 1865 there were five other interplanetary adventure books published in French, with titles like *Voyage to Venus*, *An Inhabitant of the Planet Mars*, *Voyage to the Moon*, and even a survey by an astronomer, *Imaginary Moons and Real Moons*. They featured balloons. One writer did have a dim idea of using rockets—but his squirted water out the end, not fiery gas. Then he ruined the effect, though, by thriftily collecting the ejected water to use again. Elementary common sense should have told him that such a ship would gain no momentum that way. The water's push would be cancelled when the water was caught.

Verne made fun of the invention, saying that his own method, a cannon, would certainly work. (The squitter that recycles its water idea had a puzzling appeal; it was proposed as late as 1927 by an engineer.)

He invented the expansive sense in fantastic literature, but he did it by dreaming exactly. That's what gave his work the headlong confidence those other volumes of 1865 lacked—which doomed them.

His method gave many of the telling little details which now strike us as so right. Since the USA was the most likely nation to undertake so bold a venture, where would his veterans place the cannon? Verne natters on about getting into the right "plane of the ecliptic," which is a reasonable motivation, but sidesteps the more detailed issue. He knew that to artillery gunners, Earth's rotation was important in predicting where a shell would land—while it

is in flight, the land moves beneath it.

In aiming for the Moon, there's an even bigger effect. Think of the Earth as a huge merry-go-round. If you stand at the North Pole, the Earth spins under your feet, but you won't move at all. Stand on the equator, though, and the Earth swings you around at a speed of about a thousand miles an hour. You don't feel it, because the air is moving too.

But that speed matters a lot if you're aiming to leap into orbit. Verne had the crucial idea right—that *escape velocity* is the essential in getting away from Earth's gravitational pull. The added boost from the Earth's rotation led him to believe that the American adventurers would seek a spot as close to the equator as possible, while still keeping it within their nation. A glance at the map told him that the obvious sites were in Texas or Florida.

This is exactly what happened in the American space program of nearly a century later, when the launch site of the Apollo program became a political football between Florida and Texas. Florida won, as Verne predicted. Not for political reasons, though. NASA engineers wanted their rocket stages to fall harmlessly into the ocean. He even picked Stone Hill, on almost the exact latitude as Cape Kennedy, the Apollo launch site.

Similarly, he got correctly the shape of the capsule, the number of astronauts (three), weightlessness in space, a splashdown at sea picked up by the American Navy, and even the use of rockets to change orbit and return to Earth.

To give his technology authority, his characters were cool dudes of geometry: "Here and there he wrote a pi or an x². He even appeared to extract a certain cube root with the greatest of ease."

This is the birth of "hard" science fiction—that variety which stays loyal to the facts, as nearly as the author knows them. Hard sf also sticks to the way engineers and scientists work. No lonely experimenters on mountaintops, inventing Frankenstein out of dead body parts. No easy improvising around tough problems. Verne's tinkers work in

groups, argue, make hard choices. Audiences of his time found such detail gripping and convincing.

Writers followed in this tradition, such as Arthur C. Clarke, Robert A. Heinlein—and, of course, the other master sf writer of the nineteenth century, H. G. Wells.

He influenced even those who didn't quite know who he was. Isaac Asimov once told me a story about when he was still a young science fiction fan, and found himself listening to a lecture about a great foreign writer, a master of fantastic literature. But Asimov couldn't recognize the name. Giving the French pronunciation, the lecturer said, "Surely you must know Zuehl Pfern," and described *From the Earth to the Moon*. Asimov replied in his Brooklyn accent, "Oh, you mean Jewels Voinel!"

I had a similar experience, not realizing for years that Verne was not an American. After all, he set so many of his stories in the USA. In tribute, I named a character in my first hard sf novel, *Jupiter Project*, after one of his.

He had intended to write in this scrupulous way all along, when he was a struggling writer. In 1856 he wrote in his journal, thinking about his ambitions: "Not mere poetry, but analytic fantasy. Something monomaniacal. Things playing a more important part than people, love giving way to deduction and other sources of ideas, style, subject, interest. The basis of the novel transferred from the heart to the head . . ."

And what dreams Verne had! We can grasp how much he changed the world by recalling real events which appeared first as acts of imagination, in his novels. The American submarine *Nautilus*, its name taken from his novel, surfaced at the North Pole and talked by radio with the President of the United States, less than a century after the novel was published. The explorer Haroun Tazieff, a Verne fan who had read *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, climbed down into the rumbling throat of a volcano in Africa, seeking secrets of the Earth's core. An Italian adventurer coasted over the icy Arctic wastes in a dirigible, just as Verne proposed. A French explorer

crawled into the caves of southern Europe, stumbling upon the ancient campgrounds of early man, standing before underground lakes where mammoths once roasted over crackling fires—as Verne had envisioned. In 1877 Verne foresaw a journey through the entire solar system, a feat accomplished by NASA's robot voyagers a century later.

Varley's future tech is equally sophisticated for our age, and far more self-aware. All the latest techs are here—nano-, bio-, compu-tech, with some interesting blends and cross-fertilization. Horses you can hold on your hand. Dentistry done by micro-agents in the drinking water. There are even some new sexual kinks, though, alas, it seems a fundamentally limited medium.

More to the point, the ideas and inventions cohere. Today we of the hard sf school have evolved a code of play which Varley uses to fine advantage. Memorably, at the big battle scene marking the closing movements of the novel, he presents us with a problem. The Heinleiners have invented a special "null-suit" which protects against everything—vacuum, radiation, bullets. But in an assault, people shot with machine guns emerge from their null-suits a bright lobster color, and dead. How come?

Warning: I'm going to give away the secret here. Avert your eyes if you want to preserve the suspense.

Varley lets us stew in this a bit, then unfurls the answer: conservation of energy. Sure you can block bullets, but their kinetic energy has to go somewhere. A sizable fraction reappears inside the null-suit as thermal, infrared emission, cooking the hapless folk it was supposed to protect.

It's a nice trick. This reader felt pleased that he had figured it out. To me, this is as much as a hard sf writer needs to do.

I'll admit that as a physicist I was interested enough to actually work out the numbers, and I found, as I suspected, that it's a good notion—but a dud. There isn't enough energy in a burst of machine-gun slugs to cook a person. At most you might raise body temperature by a fraction

of a degree. This is pretty obvious, once you think about it. How many gunshot victims suffer sudden fevers from the spent slug energy?

My point, though, is that Varley has done all the homework a reader can expect. Foreground delights like this are essential to the hard sf strategy, which typically slides its deeper themes in while you are distracted.

Verne did this, too. He laddled in so many calculations about his cannon and shell that the reader of 1865 apparently didn't mind the underlying embarrassment: His Moon-launching cannon would have squashed its crew at the firing. Their author does give them some relief with a water shock absorber, discussed in detail. But he must have known that it would not have helped much.

It is a bit curious why Verne chose this brute force method, when the rocket was known to him—though only as a minor military weapon and as fireworks. In *Around the Moon*, the sequel published five years later (imagine having to wait that long to find out what happened to the expedition!—readers were more tolerant then) he showed that he understood the principles of rocketry, since he let his capsule fire several, to return their ship to Earth.

Probably Verne wanted the ludicrous specifics of artillery to light up his story—to ground it in reality. People knew that cannons worked with awful efficiency. Rockets would have seemed to his audience rather odd, speculative and unlikely.

But in another sense, Verne was not wrong at all about artillery and outer space. Maybe he just saw further than our time. Though rockets opened the space frontier, through the inventions of the American Robert Goddard (an ardent Verne fan), cannon are making their comeback.

In 1991 the US government began a research program aiming to deliver payloads into orbit around the Earth at a low price—by using guns. The project has an uncanny resemblance to Verne's. The barrel, reinforced by steel and concrete, is a narrow pipe about three hundred feet long. An explosion starts the process, driving hydrogen gas against the underside of a bullet-shaped capsule. The goal

is to place a capsule in orbit within three years. Once there, it will use rockets to maneuver itself into a proper, nearly circular orbit about the Earth—just as Verne predicted.

Why now, nearly 130 years after *From the Earth to the Moon*? Finally our engineering can deal with the massive acceleration—thousands of times Earth's "gee."

We know how to make tiny circuits in rock-solid silicon. We have rockets with hard-packed chemical fuel. In fact, Iraq was developing a super-cannon to bombard Israel just two years ago—until the Israelis killed the inventor. . . .

Nothing in the capsule will be free to break loose and smash into the rest of the extremely compact "spaceship." Its instruments will be fitted together at extremely fine tolerances, with not a hair's-width of misalignment or wasted space.

This is so that the engineers can pack into a few pounds the capability to look down and monitor the Earth's environment, take readings of the conditions in orbit, and even gaze outward through fine-ground lenses to study other worlds. Such capability must be crammed into a short tube that can pass through a narrow barrel, about an inch wide.

With further engineering, it seems possible to send these solid ambassadors to probe other planets, including the Moon. They would be much cheaper than present spacecraft. Firing them into orbit (with a huge bang that would have gratified Verne) will cost about one percent of the price for putting the same payload in orbit using our present shuttle craft.

So in the end, Verne may well prove right. In his novel, the Baltimore Gun Club starts out their dream of simply putting a capsule somewhere near the Moon—shooting for the stars. Only as the plot advances do soft, easily damaged humans come into the picture. Our space program has focused on human astronauts from the beginning. Perhaps it is time to go back to the original idea.

We can fulfill Verne's great dream. In the perspective of a century, whether people are aboard is a detail. In this way, his astronauts by

gaslight are with us still. It's an appropriate time to reissue his novel.

I rather like such resonances across the 127 years. But predicting the future is not the main arena of hard sf. Surface detail hides the grave issues which emerge from science as a lived experience, and I suspect form a deep portion of the worldview of its practitioners.

By divorcing ourselves mentally from the workings of the world, we see ourselves in stark contrast with its eternal laws, slow movements and grand time scales. We are mayflies compared with the swing of planets, the lifetimes of stars. Even now, exploring missions to the outer solar system take the meat out of a whole career to plan, design, build, launch the vehicle and gather in its data. So in the end, many hard sf works return to human mortality and its implications as their profound theme.

Varley warily prowls around the expansive spirit in this novel, nudging it, drawn like a moth to a flame it desires but cannot quite trust. Suicide echoes in *Steel Beach*, a somber questioning of all exuberance.

Camus meets Verne, two Frenchmen who would not have recognized each other. To a man who says, "Why remain alive?" there's only the answer: "Because it's fun—and the alternative is boring." Or so I feel. That's the point: ultimately, emotions drive our selves, our technology, our dreams.

And Varley? After he shows in great detail Hildy's emotional isolation, I came to expect a rather sentimental—though wise—finish: she finds deep personal connections, and begins anew.

Not so. Her new romance dies in a single telephone call—the lover hangs up, thinking it's not really important, and there's a newsy crisis abuilding, after all. Her accidental but overpowering pregnancy does not lead to happy motherhood. As a writer, I savored Varley setting these fat ducks up in an obliging row, then shooting them down.

But what's a cynic to do? Despite all the wisecracking—and here Varley is second to none, including Heinlein and Haldeman—in the end he is drawn back to the same emotional ground that animated Verne. To me,

it is a true surprise ending, because I thought Hildy was far too well, distanced from her world to ever enter it so wholeheartedly.

Hildy volunteers to help put the starship *Robert A. Heinlein* back together with the proverbial string and glue. She'll be the publicity hound for the Good Ol' Up and Out, a role Heinlein fulfilled, indirectly, for decades. Heinlein's trouble as a novelist was endings, and Varley knows that, too:

"I promised you no neat conclusion, and I think I've delivered on that. I warned you of loose ends, and I can see a whole tangle of them."

A novel which aspires to be about a year in a life can be a bit lumpy and malformed, in the cause of art that resembles life. But the book ends by voting for the great up-and-out, the horizon, the frontier.

"What will we find out there? I don't know either, and that's why I'm going along. Alien intelligences? I wouldn't bet against it. Strange worlds? I'd say that's a lock. Vast empty spaces, human tragedy and hope. . . . Think what a story it'll be."

Very Heinlein. Very Verne.

Verne died only a few months before the Wright brothers' first flight at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina—but he had seen such flights in his mind's eye decades before, and the brothers had read his novels.

We can get a feeling for his faith in the long-range possibilities of humanity from the remarkable memorial his son placed over his father's grave. It shows Verne with hair streaming, as if he is in flight, breaking free of his shroud and tomb, rising up magnificently from the dead. Above it are simply his name and the words, *Onward to immortality and eternal youth*. It's hard to be more optimistic than that.

And Varley expresses, in suitably technophic garb, something that strikes from the same deep ground. Sophisticated, but not cynical. After so much sf-noir about burned-out louts with improbable tech skills, tropes copied from the hardboiled detectives of a half-century back, Varley's vision seems refreshingly new, though warmly old. ♦

Tomorrow's Books

April 1993 Releases

Compiled by Susan C. Stone
and Bill Fawcett

Poul Anderson: *People of the Wind* Baen SF, pb reiss, 240 pp, \$4.99. The planet Avalon was settled by two starfaring peoples, one born of Earth, the other of the sky. And now their parent races will soon be at war, and Avalon must choose sides, or defy both.

Mark Anthony: *Crypt of the Shadowking* TSR Fantasy, pb orig, 320 pp, \$4.95. Book 6 of the FORGOTTEN REALMS® Harpers series.

Lou Aronica, Amy Stout & Betsy Mitchell, editors: *Full Spectrum 4* Bantam Spectra SF, tr pb, 528 pp, \$12.95. An anthology of 20 original SF stories by David Brin, Ursula K. Le Guin, Stephen R. Donaldson, and others.

Isaac Asimov: *Lucky Starr Book 1* Bantam Spectra SF, pb reiss, 288 pp, \$4.99. Omnibus edition containing *David Starr*, *Space Ranger* and *Lucky Starr and the Pirates of the Asteroids*.

Isaac Asimov and Frederik Pohl: *Our Angry Earth* Tor Nonfiction, first time in pb, 416 pp, \$4.99. Two of America's most noted futurists provide a guide to a better, healthier environment.

Robert Asprin: *The Bug Wars* Ace SF, pb reiss, 224 pp, \$4.50. An alien soldier's eye view of a war between two space-traveling races.

L. Frank Baum: *The Wizard of Oz* Tor Classic, pb reiss, 224 pp, \$2.50. An unabridged edition of this classic story.

Marion Zimmer Bradley and Mercedes Lackey: *Rediscovery* DAW Fantasy, hc, 304 pp, \$18.00. The story of the rediscovery of Darkover by a ship from her mother planet, Earth.

Marion Zimmer Bradley: *Sbarra's Exile* DAW Fantasy, pb reiss, \$4.99. A Darkover novel set in the Second Age.

Marion Zimmer Bradley: *Stormqueen!* DAW Fantasy, pb reiss, \$4.50. A Darkover novel set in the Ages of Chaos.

Marion Zimmer Bradley: *The Shattered Chain* DAW Fantasy, pb reiss, \$3.95. A Darkover novel about the Renunciates (Free Amazons).

Marion Zimmer Bradley: *City of Sorcery* DAW Fantasy, pb reiss, \$4.50. A Darkover novel about the Renunciates (Free Amazons).

Marion Zimmer Bradley: *Hawk-mistress!* DAW Fantasy, pb reiss, \$4.99. A Darkover novel set in the Ages of Chaos.

Marion Zimmer Bradley: *Darkover Landfall* DAW Fantasy, pb reiss, \$3.95. A novel about the founding of Darkover.

Traci Briery: *The Vampire Journals* Zebra Horror, pb orig, 352 pp, \$4.50. Maria Theresa Allogiamiento, a vampire ahead of her time, plans to set the record straight about the world of vampires.

Steven Brust: *Aethya* Ace Fantasy, pb orig, 256 pp, \$4.50. Vlad Taltos is back!

Carmen Carter: *Star Trek The Next Generation: The Devil's Heart* Pocket Books, hc, 352 pp, \$20.00. The legendary Devil's Heart is an artifact thought to

offer control of men's minds, and much more. But when the fabled object is found, Captain Picard must discover the truth behind the legends.

Adrian Cole: *Star Requiem 3: Warlord of Heaven* AvoNova Fantasy, first US edition, 368 pp, \$4.99. The fearsome Csendook warlord Auganzar relentlessly searches the galaxy for his human prey. And on Innasmorn, courageous young Ussemittus takes up arms to defend his home world.

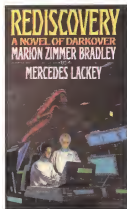
Tony Daniel: *Warpath* Tor SF, hc, 288 pp, \$18.95. In the far future, humankind spreads to the stars—only to discover that American Indians got there first.

Elisa DeCarlo: *The Devil You Say* AvoNova Fantasy, pb orig, 192 pp, \$4.50. When he agreed to buy a mysterious Book of Shadows, London psychic Aubrey Arbutnot never dreamed it would later be up to him to destroy the book to save the entire world from damnation.

Charles de Lint: *Dreams Underfoot* Tor Fantasy, hc, 448 pp, \$22.95. The streets of Newford are filled with fey folk, magicians, hustlers, painters, fiddlers, and ordinary people who stumble headfirst into enchantment and never come out the same.

Gordon R. Dickson: *Soldier, Ask Not* Tor SF, pb reiss, 320 pp, \$4.99. A novel in the Childe Cycle. Sequel to *Dorsai!*

Carole Nelson Douglas: *Pussyfoot* Tor Mystery, hc, 256 pp, \$18.95. A Midnight Louie mystery set on the sinful streets of Las Vegas.



Key to Abbreviations

hc: hardcover, almost always an original publication.

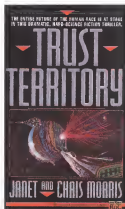
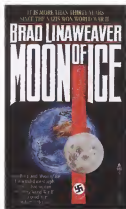
pb orig: paperback original, not published previously in any other format.

pb reiss: paperback reissue, designating a title that was previously published in paperback but has been out of print.

pb rep: paperback reprint, designating a title that was previously published

in hardcover or trade paperback (sometimes expressed as **first time in pb**).

tr pb: trade paperback, a format using pages larger than a paperback but generally smaller than a hardcover, with a flexible cover.



Tom Dowd: *Night's Pawn* Roc SF, pb orig, 288 pp., \$4.99. A *Shadowrun* novel.

Dave Duncan: *The Cutting Edge, Part 1: A Handful of Men* Del Rey Fantasy, first time in pb, \$4.99. Spinoff from the *A Man of His Word* series. Years ago, Queen Inos married Rap, the devoted stableboy who had saved her life. But now a god has warned Rap that devastation is imminent and it is all Rap's fault.

Philip Jose Farmer: *The Other Log of Phileas Fogg* Tor SF, 304 pp., \$3.99. A wild retelling of Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days*.

Alan Dean Foster: *Son of Spell-singer* Questar Fantasy, pb orig, 304 pp., \$5.50. On the world of the spell-singers anything is possible, including a teenage son of a spell-singer who forms a "trash metal" rap band to battle for the future of the planet.

Alan Dean Foster: *The Spoils of War* Del Rey SF, hc, 288 pp., \$19.00. In this concluding volume of *The Damned*, the alien alliance known as the Weave and their human allies succeed against the dreaded Amplitur, only to face an unexpected threat within their own ranks.

Craig Shaw Gardner: *The Last Arabian Night* Ace Fantasy, pb orig, 240 pp., \$4.50. The story of Scheherazade as it has never been told before.

Mel Gilzen: *Star Trek #64: The Starship Trap* Pocket Books, pb orig, 256 pp., \$5.50. Captain Kirk and the crew of the *Enterprise* investigate an area of space where Klingon, Romulan and Federation ships are vanishing without a trace.

Martin Harry Greenberg, editor: *After the King* Tor Fantasy, tp pb, 448 pp., \$12.95. An anthology of stories in honor of J. R. R. Tolkien, by acclaimed and popular fantasy authors, with an introduction by Jane Yolen.

D. J. Heinrich: *The Dragon's Tomb* TSR Fantasy, pb orig, 320 pp., \$4.95. Volume 2 of the DUNGEONS & DRAGONS™ Penhalion Trilogy.

Tom Holt: *Ye Gods!* A Thomas Dunne Book, hc, 304 pp., \$19.95. A comic fantasy update on the state of the Greek gods today.

Dean Ing: *Wild Country* Tor Thriller, pb reiss, 320 pp., \$3.99. Sequel to *Single Combat*.

William S. Kirby: *Iapetus* Ace SF, pb orig, 256 pp., \$4.50. The only thing colder than space is a killer's heart.

Mercedes Lackey and Ru Emerson: *Fortress of Frost and Fire* Baen Fantasy, pb orig, 304 pp., \$5.99. A sequel to *Castle of Deception*, set 20 years later. The Dark Elf Naitachal is now a Master Bard, with a human apprentice.

Mercedes Lackey and Josepha Sherman: *Castle of Deception* Baen Fantasy, pb reiss, 320 pp., \$5.99. A novel based on the computer game *The Bard's Tale*.

Simon Lang: *Timeslide* Ace SF, pb orig, 272 pp., \$4.99. The crew of the USS *Skipjack* goes back into time in an attempt to save two worlds.

John Lee: *The Unicorn Peace* Tor Fantasy, pb orig, 352 pp., \$4.99. A new novel in the Saga of Strand. As the old order changes, and a new war brews between magical and technological kingdoms, the unicorns return.

Herbert Lieberman: *Sanctuary* Sleep A Thomas Dunne Book, hc, 384 pp., \$22.95. A murder mystery set in the not too distant future.

Brad Linaweaver: *Moon of Ice* Tor SF, first time in pb, 320 pp., \$4.99. It's more than 30 years since the Nazis won WWII, and it's time to reveal the Reich's secret occult religion and create their utopia.

William H. Lovejoy: *Delta Green*

Zebra Technothriller, pb orig, 384 pp., \$4.50. Another novel featuring the super-stealth skyfighters of the Delta Force.

Anne McCaffrey and S. M. Stirling: *The Ship Who Fought* Baen SF, hc, 432 pp., \$19.00. The story of a shellperson running a peaceful space station who becomes a military hero in the face of an invasion.

Anne McCaffrey and Margaret Ball: *Partnership* Baen SF, pb reiss, 336 pp., \$5.99. Nancia is an idealistic shellperson, working for the elite Courier Service of the Central Worlds, with a cynical, world-wise brawn partner.

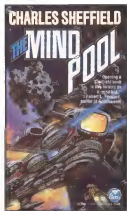
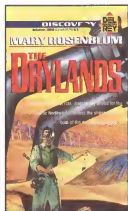
Anne McCaffrey and Mercedes Lackey: *The Ship Who Searched* Baen SF, pb reiss, 320 pp., \$5.99. When seven-year-old Tia is paralyzed by an alien virus, she becomes a shellperson with a special mission: to eliminate what ever it was that laid her low.

Thomas F. Monteleone: *The Blood of the Lamb* Tor Thriller, first time in pb, 416 pp., \$5.99. A charismatic priest, working in Brooklyn, discovers he has miraculous powers.

Janet and Chris Morris: *Trust Territory* Roc SF, pb orig, 272 pp., \$4.99. Second novel in the Threshold series, where a pilot is thrown 500 years into the future.

William F. Nolan and Martin H. Greenberg, editors: *Urban Horror* DAW Horror, pb orig, 368 pp., \$5.50. An anthology of 18 horror stories with urban settings. Stories from Ray Bradbury, Richard Matheson, Shirley Jackson, John Cheever, and others.

Andre Norton and P. M. Griffin: *Redline the Stars* Tor SF, hc, 320 pp., \$19.95. In this new *Solar Queen* novel, the *Queen's* crew must deal with a plague of rats, an explosive crisis in dock, and a new crew member who is half-sister to their most powerful rival.



Andre Norton and Mercedes Lackey: *The Elvenbane* Tor Fantasy, first time in pb, 576 pp, \$5.99. Shanna, a cast-out elfen/human halfbreed child, was rescued and raised by dragons. Now, adult and endowed with magical powers, she sets out to find her destiny among her own people.

Jerry Pournelle, editor: *There Will Be War Volume IV: Day of the Tyrant* Tor SF, pb reiss, \$3.95.

Mickey Zucker Reichert: *Child of Thunder* DAW Fantasy, pb orig, 592 pp, \$5.99. *The Last of the Renshai* Book 3. Colbey, Renshai warrior, hero, and teacher, finally accepts the role of the Western Wizard.

Mickey Zucker Reichert: *The Last of the Renshai* DAW Fantasy, pb reiss, \$5.99. Book 1 of the series. The last Renshai warrior is rightly feared—a hero in a world living under the shadow of an ancient prophecy of war.

Mickey Zucker Reichert: *The Western Wizard* DAW Fantasy, pb reiss, \$5.99. *The Last of the Renshai* Book 2. The balance of magic has shifted and gods and mortals alike will perish unless the new Western Wizard can be found.

John Maddox Roberts: *The Steel Kings* Tor Fantasy, pb orig, 320 pp, \$4.99. Book 4 of *Stormlands*. Only legends remain of a time when men could fly to the moon. Now, all metals are rare and the most precious of all is steel.

Mary Rosenblum: *The Drylands* Del Rey Discovery SF, pb orig, \$3.99. A timely ecological adventure set in the Northwest.

Charles Sheffield: *The Mind Pool* Baen SF, pb orig, 432 pp, \$4.99. Previously published in shorter form as *The Nimrod Hunt*. The Cyborgs had been designed to protect the Galaxy—now it's up to the despised backwater Earth to protect the Galaxy from them.

Charles Sheffield: *Transcendence* Del Rey SF, first time in pb, \$4.99. The conclusion to the Heritage Universe, followup of *Summertide* and *Divergence*. The Zardalu had been thought extinct for eleven thousand years; then explorers discovered the only survivors of the monstrous alien race, frozen in stasis... and freed them.

Sam Siciliano: *Blood Feud* Pinnacle Horror, pb orig, 320 pp, \$4.50. The tale of two ruthless vampires driven by their insatiable thirsts for revenge.

Kevin Stein: *Twisted Dragon* Ace Fantasy, pb orig, 192 pp, \$4.50. Elfwood Castle is under siege by mysterious wizards whose mere presence fills everyone with fear. Their only hope is a dragon that is rampaging across the fiefdom.

Jane Toombs: *Moonrunner: Galber Darkness* Roc Fantasy, pb orig, 304 pp, \$4.99. The second volume of a historical fantasy trilogy set during the San Francisco Earthquake and WWI.

Joan D. Vinge: *World's End* Tor SF, pb reiss, 284 pp, \$4.99. Sequel to *The Snow Queen*. Outcast policeman BZ Gundhalinu follows his brothers to the wasteland of World's End, and changes both his future and the galaxy forever.

David Weber: *On Basilisk Station* Baen SF, pb orig, 416 pp, \$4.99. Commander Honor Harrington has been exiled to Basilisk Station in disgrace, but her enemies have made one mistake. They've made her mad.

David Weber: *Mutineers Moon* Baen SF, pb orig, 320 pp, \$4.50. When Lt. Commander Colin MacIntyre left for a routine training mission over Luna Far-side, his ship was grabbed by an alien computer and forced into battle against an ancient enemy now returning to threaten Earth.

Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman: *The Hand of Chaos* Bantam Spectra

Fantasy, hc, 448 pp, \$21.95. In this fifth *Death Gate* novel, Sartan and Patryn—powerful races who once believed they were gods—rediscover their age-old hatred of one another... and find they have an even more terrifying enemy in common.

Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman: *Serpent Mage* Bantam Fantasy, first time in pb, 464 pp, \$5.99. The newest stand-alone volume in *The Death Gate* Cycle, set on the fourth elemental realm—the water world of Chelstra.

Michael and Teri Williams: *Before the Mask* TSR Fantasy, pb orig, 320 pp, \$4.95. Volume 1 of the *DRAGONLANCE®* Villains series.

J. N. Williamson: *Don't Take Away The Light* Zebra Horror, pb orig, 416 pp, \$4.50. A little boy must overcome the most frightening monster in his life—his mother.

Gene Wolfe: *Nightside the Long Sun* Tor SF, hc, 336 pp, \$21.95. The first book of *Starcrosser's Landfall*. The human inhabitants of the Whorl, a world existing inside a giant starship sent from Urth to colonize a distant planet, struggle to satisfy the demands of their gods.

Dave Wolverton: *Path of the Hero* Bantam Spectra SF, pb orig, 400 pp, \$5.99. Set on the same world as *Serpent Catch*. Earth's paleobiologists established Anee as a storehouse of dinosaurs and other extinct species. Now, a thousand years later, half-Neanderthal Tull must free himself of the beast within to save Anee from self destruction.

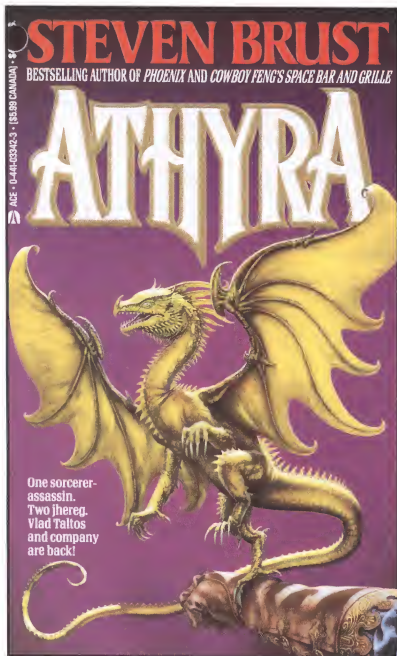
William F. Wu: *Isaac Asimov's Robots in Time: Predator* AvoNova SF, pb orig, 256 pp, \$4.99. When the new city Mojave Center experiences a breakdown of its municipal robot systems, one robot saves itself by escaping into the Age of Dinosaurs, and puts the web of human history at risk.

Looking Forward:

Athyra

by Steven Brust

Coming in April 1993 from Ace Books



Cover art by Ciruelo Cabral

Introduction by Bill Fawcett

Vlad Taltos was basically a peace-loving guy, for an assassin. He had made his bundle and was looking forward to a quiet retirement with his two poisonous pets. To accomplish this he travels far into the "quiet" countryside, where he can escape his reputation and his enemies. But in this newest novel in the Taltos series, Vlad instead finds himself taking on the best the House of Jhereg can send against him.

The following excerpt is from early in the story. After the mysterious death of one of their own, the townsfolk are beginning to wonder about Vlad . . . and Vlad is more than a little curious about them, too.

He stared insolently back at the room, his expression impossible to read, save that it seemed to Savn that there was perhaps a smile hidden by the black hair that grew above his lip and curled down around the corners of his mouth. After giving the room one long, thorough look, he stepped fully inside and slowly came up to the counter until he was facing Tem. He spoke in a voice that was not loud, yet carried very well. He said, "Do you have anything to drink here that doesn't taste like linseed oil?"

Tem looked at him, started to scowl, shifted nervously and glanced around the room. He cleared his throat, but didn't speak.

"I take it that means no?" said Vlad.

Someone near Savn whispered, very softly, "They should send for His Lordship." Savn wondered who "they" were.

Vlad leaned against the serving counter and folded his arms; Savn wondered if he were signaling a lack of hostility, or if the gesture meant something entirely different among Easterners. Vlad turned his head so that he was looking at Tem, and said, "Not far south of here is a cliff, overlooking a river. There were quite a few people at the river, bathing, swimming, washing clothes."

Tem clenched his jaw, then said, "What about it?"

"Nothing, really," said Vlad. "But if that's Smallcliff, it's pretty big."

"Smallcliff is to the north," said Tem. "We live *below* Smallcliff."

"Well, that would explain it, then," said Vlad. "But it is really a very pleasant view; one can see for miles."

May I please have some water?"

Tem looked around at the forty or fifty people gathered in the house, and Savn wondered if he were waiting for someone to tell him what to do. At last he got a cup and poured fresh water into it from the jug below the counter.

"Thank you," said Vlad, and took a long draught.

"What are you doing here?" said Tem.

"Drinking water. If you want to know why, it's because everything else tastes like linseed oil." He drank again, then wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. Someone muttered something about "If he doesn't like it here . . ." and someone else said something about "haughty as a lord."

Tem cleared his throat and opened his mouth, shut it again, then looked once more at his guests. Vlad, apparently oblivious to all of this, said, "While I was up there, I saw a corpse being brought along the road in a wagon. They came to a large, smoking hole in the ground, and people put the body into the hole and burned it. It seemed to be some kind of ceremony."

It seemed to Savn that everyone in the room somehow contrived to simultaneously gasp and fall silent. Tem scowled and said, "What business is that of yours?"

"I got a good look at the body. The poor fellow looked familiar, though I'm not certain why."

Someone, evidently one of those who had brought Reins to the firepit, muttered, "I didn't see you there."

Vlad turned to him, smiled, and said, "Thank you very much."

Savn wanted to smile himself, but concealed his expression behind his hand when he saw that no one else seemed to think it was funny.

Tem said, "You knew him, did you?"

"I believe so. How did he happen to become dead?"

Tem leaned over the counter and said, "Maybe you could tell us."

Vlad looked at the Housemaster long and hard, then at the guests once more, and then suddenly he laughed, and Savn let out his breath, which he had been unaware of holding.

"So that's it," said Vlad. "I wondered why everyone was looking at me like I'd come walking into town with the three-day fever. You think I killed the fellow, and then just sort of decided to stay here and see what everyone said about it, and then maybe bring up the sub-

ject in case anyone missed it." He laughed again. "I don't really mind you thinking I'd murder someone, but I am not entirely pleased with what you seem to think of my intelligence."

"But, all right, what's the plan, my friends? Are you going to stone me to death? Beat me to death? Call your Baron to send in his soldiers?" He shook his head slowly. "What a peck of fools."

"Now, look," said Tem, whose face had become rather red. "No one said you did it; we're just wondering if you know—"

"I don't know," the Easterner said. Then added, "Yet."

"But you're going to?" said Tem.

"Very likely," he said. "I will, in any case, look into the matter."

Tem looked puzzled, as if the conversation had suddenly gone in a direction for which he couldn't account. "I don't understand," he said at last. "Why?"

The Easterner studied the backs of his hands. Savn looked at them, too, and decided that the missing finger was not natural, and he wondered how Vlad had lost it. "As I said," continued Vlad, "I think I knew him. I want to at least find out why he looks so familiar. May I please have some more water?" He dug a copper piece out of a pouch at his belt and put it on the counter, then nodded to the room at large and made his way through the curtain in the back of the room, presumably to return to the chamber where he was staying.

Everyone watched him; no one spoke. The sound of his footsteps echoed unnaturally loud, and Savn fancied that he could even hear the rustle of fabric as Vlad pushed aside the door-curtain, and a scraping sound from above as a bird perched on the roof of the house.

The conversation in the room was stilled. Savn's friends didn't say anything at all for a while. Savn looked around the room in time to see Firi leaving with a couple of her friends, which disappointed him. He thought about getting up to talk to her, but realized that it would look like he was chasing her. An older woman who was sitting behind Savn muttered something about how the Speaker should do something. A voice that Savn recognized as belonging to old Dymon echoed Savn's own thought that perhaps informing His Lordship that an Easterner had drunk a glass of water at Tem's house might be considered an overreaction. This started a heated argument about who Tem should and shouldn't let stay under his roof. The argument ended when Dymon hooted with laughter and walked out.

Savn noticed that the room was gradually emptying, and he heard several people say they were going to talk to either Speaker or Bless, neither of whom was present, and "see that something was done about this."

He was trying to figure out what "this" was when Mae and Pae rose, collected Polyi, and approached him. Mae said, "Come along, Savn, it's time for us to be going home."

"Is it all right if I stay here for a while? I want to keep talking to my friends."

His parents looked at each other, and perhaps couldn't think of how to phrase a refusal, so they grunted per-

mission. Poly must have received some sort of rejection from one of the boys, perhaps Ori, because she made no objection to being made to leave, but in fact hurried out to the wagon while Savn was still saying goodbye to his parents and being told to be certain he was home by midnight.

In less than five minutes, the room was empty except for Tem, Savn, Coral, a couple of their friends, and a few old women who practically lived at Tem's house.

"Well," said Coral. "Isn't *he* the cheeky one?"

"Who?"

"Who do you think? The Easterner."

"Oh. Cheeky?" said Savn.

"Did you see how he looked at us?" said Coral.

"Yeah," said Lan, a large fellow who was soon to be officially apprenticed to Piper. "Like we were all grass and he was deciding if he ought to mow us."

"More like we were weeds, and not worth the trouble," said Tuk, who was Lan's older brother and was in his tenth year as Hider's apprentice. They were proud of the fact that both of them had "filled the bucket" and been apprenticed to trade.

"That's what I thought," said Coral.

"I don't know," said Savn. "I was just thinking, I sure wouldn't like to walk into a place and have everybody staring at me like that. It'd scare the blood out of my skin."

"Well, it didn't seem to disturb *him* any," said Lan.

"No," said Savn. "It didn't."

Tuk said, "We shouldn't talk about him. They say Easterners can hear anything you say about them."

"Do you believe that?" said Savn.

"It's what I've heard."

Lan nodded. "And they can turn your food bad when they want, even after you've eaten it."

"Why would he want to do that?"

"Why would he want to kill Reins?" said Coral.

"I don't think he did," said Savn.

"Why not?" said Tuk.

"Because he couldn't have," said Savn. "There weren't any marks on him."

"Maybe he's a wizard," said Lan.

"Easterners aren't wizards."

Coral frowned. "You can say what you want, I think he killed him."

"But why would he?" said Savn.

"How should I—" Coral broke off, looking around the room. "What was that?"

"It was on the roof, I think. Birds, probably."

"Yeah? Pretty big ones, then."

As if by unspoken agreement they ran to the window. Coral got there first, stuck his head out, and jerked it back in again just as fast.

"What is it?" said the others.

"A *jhereg*," said Coral, his eyes wide. "A big one."

"What was it doing?" said Savn.

"Just standing on the edge of the roof looking down at me."

"Huh?" said Savn. "Let me see."

"Welcome."

"Don't let its tongue touch you," said Tuk. "It's poisonous."

Savn looked out hesitantly, while Coral said, "Stand under it, but don't let it lick you."

"The gods!" said Savn, pulling his head in. "It *is* big. A female, I think. Who else wants to see?"

The others declined the honor, in spite of much urging by Savn and Coral, who, having already proven themselves, felt they wouldn't have to again. "Huh-uh," said Tuk. "They bite."

"And they spit poison," added Lan.

"They do not," said Savn. "They bite, but they don't spit, and they can't hurt you just by licking you." He was beginning to feel a bit proprietary toward them, having seen so many recently.

Meanwhile, Tem had noticed the disturbance. He came up behind them and said, "What's going on over here?"

"A *jhereg*," said Coral. "A big one."

"A *jhereg*? Where?"

"On your roof," said Savn.

"Right above the window," said Coral.

Tem glanced out, then pulled his head back in slowly, filling the boys with equal measures of admiration and envy. "You're right," he said. "It's a bad omen."

"It *is*," said Coral.

Tem nodded. He seemed about to speak further, but at that moment, preceded by a heavy thumping of boots, Vlad appeared once more.

"Good evening," he said. Savn decided that what was remarkable about his voice was that it was so normal, and it ought not to be. It should either be deep and husky to match his build, or high and fluty to match his size, yet he sounded completely human.

He sat down near where Savn and his friends had been seated and said, "I'd like a glass of wine, please."

Tem clenched his teeth like Master Wag, then said, "What sort of wine?"

"Any color, any district, any characteristics, just so long as it is wet."

The old women, who had been studiously ignoring the antics of Savn and his friends, arose as one and, with imperious glares first at the Easterner, then at Tem, stalked out. Vlad continued, "I like it better here with fewer people. The wine, if you please?"

Tem fetched him a cup of wine, which Vlad paid for. He drank some, then set the mug down and stared at it, turning it in a slow circle on the table. He appeared oblivious to the fact that Savn and his friends were staring at him.

After a short time, Coral, followed by the others, made his way back to the table. It seemed to Savn that Coral was walking gingerly, as if afraid to disturb the Easterner. When they were all seated, Vlad looked at them with an expression that was a mockery of innocence. He said, "So tell me, gentlemen, of this land. What is it like?"

The four boys looked at each other. How could one answer such a question?

Vlad said, "I mean, do bodies always show up out of nowhere, or is this a special occasion?"

Coral twitched as if stung; Savn almost smiled but caught himself in time. Tuk and Lan muttered something inaudible; then, with a look at Coral and Savn, they got up and left. Coral hesitated, stood up, looked at Savn, started to say something, then followed his friends out the door.

Vlad shook his head. "I seem to be driving away business today. I really don't mean to. I hope Goodman Tem isn't unhappy with me."

"Are you a wizard?" said Savn.

Vlad laughed. "What do you know about wizards?"

"Well, they live forever, and you can't hurt them because they keep their souls in magic boxes without any way inside, and they can make you do things you don't want to do, and—"

Vlad laughed again. "Well, then I'm certainly not a wizard."

Savn started to ask what was funny; then he caught sight of Vlad's maimed hand, and it occurred to him that a wizard wouldn't have allowed that to happen.

After an uncomfortable silence, Savn said, "Why did you say that?"

"Say what?"

"About . . . bodies."

"Oh. I wanted to know."

"It was cruel."

"Was it? In fact, I meant the question. It surprises me to find into a place like this and find that a body has followed me in. It makes me uncomfortable. It makes me curious."

"There have been others who noticed it, too."

"I'm not surprised. And whispers about me, no doubt."

"Well, yes."

"What exactly killed him?"

"No one knows."

"Oh?"

"There was no mark on him, at any rate, and my friends told me that Master Wag was puzzled."

"Is Master Wag good at this sort of thing?"

"Oh, yes. He could tell if he died from disease, or if someone beat him, or if someone cast a spell on him, or anything. And he just doesn't know yet."

"Hmmm. It's a shame."

Savn nodded. "Poor Reins. He was a nice man."

"Reins?"

"That was his name."

"An odd name."

"It wasn't his birth name; he was just called that because he drove."

"Drove? A coach?"

"No, no; he made deliveries and such."

"Really. That starts to bring something back."

"Bring something back?"

"As I said, I think I recognize him. I wonder if I could be near . . . who is lord of these lands?"

"His Lordship, the Baron."

"Has he a name?"

"Baron Smallcliff."

"And you don't know his given name?"

"I've heard it, but I can't think of it at the moment."

"How about his father's name? Or, rather, the name of whoever the old Baron was?"

Savn shook his head.

Vlad said, "Does the name 'Loraan' sound familiar?"

"That's it!"

Vlad chuckled softly. "That is almost amusing."

"What is?"

"Nothing, nothing. And was Reins the man who used to make deliveries to Loraan?"

"Well, Reins drove everywhere. He made deliveries for, well, for just about everyone."

"But did his duties take him to the Baron's keep?"

"Well, I guess they must have."

Vlad nodded. "I thought so."

"Hmmm?"

"I used to know him. Only very briefly I'm afraid, but still—"

Savn shook his head. "I've never seen you around here before."

"It wasn't quite around here; it was at Loraan's keep rather than his manor house. The keep, if I recall the landscape correctly, must be on the other side of the Brownclay."

"Yes, that's right."

"And I didn't spend much time there, either." Vlad smiled as he said this, as if enjoying a private joke. Then he said, "Who is Baron now?"

"Who? Why, the Baron is the Baron, same as always."

"But after the old Baron died, did his son inherit?"

"Oh, I guess so. That was before I was born."

The Easterner's eyes widened, which seemed to mean the same thing in an Easterner that it did in a human.

"Didn't the old Baron die just a few years ago?"

"Oh, no. He's been there for years and years."

"You mean Loraan is the Baron *now*?"

"Of course. Who else? I thought that's what you meant." "My, my, my." Vlad tapped the edge of his wine cup against the table. After a moment he said, "If he died, are you certain you'd know?"

"Huh? Of course I'd know. I mean, people see him, don't they? Even if he doesn't appear around here often, there's still deliveries, and messengers, and—"

"I see. Well, this is all very interesting."

"What is?"

"I had thought him dead some years ago."

"He isn't dead at all," said Savn. "In fact, he just came to stay at his manor house, a league or so from town, near the place I first saw you."

"Indeed?"

"Yes."

"And that isn't his son?"

"He isn't married," said Savn.

"How unfortunate for him," said Vlad. "Have you ever actually seen him?"

"Certainly. Twice, in fact. He came through here with his retainers, in a big coach, with silver everywhere, and six horses, and a big Athyra embossed in—"

"Were either of those times recent?"

Savn started to speak, stopped, and considered. "What do you mean, 'recent'?"

Vlad laughed. "Well taken. Within, say, the last five years?"

"Oh. No."

The Easterner took another sip of his wine, set the cup down, closed his eyes, and, after a long moment, said, "There is a high cliff over the Lower Brownclay. In fact, there is a valley that was probably cut by the river."

"Yes, there is."

"Are there caves, Savn?"

He blinked. "Many, all along the walls of the cliff. How do you know?"

"I knew about the valley because I saw it, earlier today, and the river. As for the caves, I didn't know; I guessed. But now that I do know, I would venture a further guess that there is water to be found in those caves."

"There's water in at least one of them; I've heard it trickling."

Vlad nodded. "It makes sense."

"*What* makes sense, Vlad?"

"Loraan was—excuse me—is a wizard, and one who has studied necromancy. It would make sense that he lived near a place where Dark Water flows."

"Dark Water? What is that?"

"Water that has never seen the light of day."

"Oh. But what does that have to do with—what was his name?"

"Loraan. Baron Smallcliff. Such water is useful in the practice of necromancy. When stagnant and contained, it can be used to weaken and repel the undead, but when flowing free they can use it to prolong their life. It's a bittersweet tapestry of life itself," he added, in what Savn thought was an ironic tone of voice.

"I don't understand."

"Never mind. Would it matter to you if you were to discover that your lord is undead?"

"*What*?"

"I'll take that as a yes. Good. That may matter, later."

"Vlad, I don't understand—"

"Don't worry about it; that isn't the important thing."

"You seem to be talking in riddles."

"No, just thinking aloud. The important thing isn't how he survived; the important thing is what he knows. Aye, what he knows, and what he's doing about it."

Savn struggled to make sense of this, and at last said, "What he knows about what?"

Vlad shook his head. "There are such things as coincidence, but I don't believe one can go that far." Savn started to say something, but Vlad raised his hand.

"Think of it this way, my friend; many years ago, a man helped me to pull a nasty joke on your Baron. Now, on the very day I come walking through the fief, the man who helped me turns up mysteriously dead right in front of me. And the victim of this little prank moves to his manor house, which happens to be just outside the village I'm passing through. Would you believe this could happen by accident?"

The implications of everything Vlad was saying were too many and far-reaching, but Savn was able to understand enough to say, "No."

"I wouldn't, either. And I don't."

"But what does it mean?"

"I'm not certain," Vlad said. "Perhaps it was foolish of me to come this way, but I didn't realize exactly where I was, and, in any case, I thought Loraan was . . . I thought it would be safe. Speaking of safe, I guess what it means is that I'm not very."

Savn said, "You're leaving, then?" He was surprised to discover how disappointed he was at the thought.

"Leaving? No. It's probably too late for that. And besides, this fellow, Reins, helped me, and if that had anything to do with his death, that means I have matters to attend to."

Savn struggled with this, and at last said, "What matters?"

But Vlad had fallen silent again; he stared off into space, as if taken by a sudden thought. He sat that way for nearly a minute, and from time to time his lips seemed to move. At last he grunted and nodded faintly.

Savn repeated his question. "What matters will you have to attend to?"

"Eh?" said Vlad. "Oh. Nothing important."

Savn waited. Vlad leaned back in his chair, his eyes open but focused on the ceiling. Twice the corner of his mouth twitched as if he were smiling; once he shuddered as if something frightened him. Savn wondered what he was thinking about. He was about to ask, when Vlad's head suddenly snapped down and he was looking directly at Savn.

"The other day, you started to ask me about witchcraft."

"Well, yes," said Savn. "Why—"

"How would you like to learn?"

"Learn? You mean, how to, uh—"

"We call it casting spells, just like sorcerers do. Are you interested?"

"I'd never thought about it before."

"Well, think about it."

"Why would you want to teach me?"

"There are reasons."

"I don't know."

"Frankly, I'm surprised at your hesitation. It would be useful to me if someone knew certain spells. It doesn't have to be you; I just thought you'd want to. I could find someone else. Perhaps one of those young men—"

"All right."

Vlad didn't smile; he just nodded slightly and said, "Good."

"When should we begin?"

"Now would be fine," said the Easterner, and rose to his feet. "Come with me." ♦

Looking Forward:

The Devil You Say

by Elisa DeCarlo

Coming in April 1993 from AvoNova Books

Introduction by Bill Fawcett

This contemporary fantasy is a refreshing mix of action, suspense, and humor in an English setting. The hero, Aubrey Arbuthnot, unwittingly complicates his life—and endangers it—by bidding on a mysterious tome known as the Book of Shadows at an auction. His bid wins the book for his client, but later causes him to be seduced by an evil priestess, pursued by two demons, and involved with two maidens destined for sacrifice.

In this excerpt, Aubrey and his cohorts consult a psychic and find out just how much trouble they have gotten themselves into.

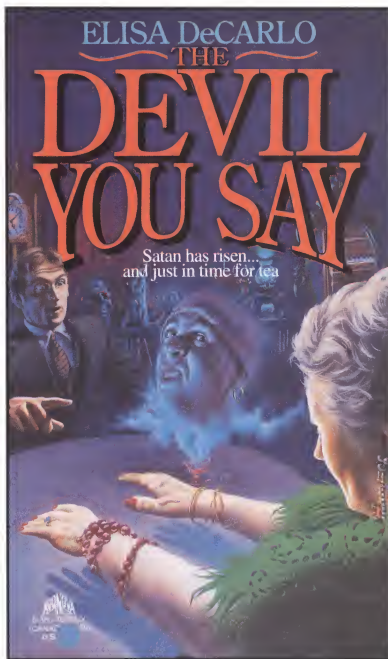
As Hornchurch drove the car through Islington, Carlton looked uneasily out at the rainy streets. Islington was not one of London's better neighborhoods. "I've never been this far north of Hyde Park," he said.

"Worried about rubbing shoulders with the working classes, old chap?" I asked.

"Who is this Mrs. Griswold?"

"Binnie Griswold is the best psychic in London, Carto. She taught me everything I know. She gave me lessons in telepathy, levitation, reading auras, the lot. You remember. After Percy's seance. Hornchurch introduced us."

"If she's so marvelous, why does she live here?"



Cover art by James Warren

I shrugged. "We psychics don't seem to be able to use our abilities to further ourselves, not unless we go over to evil. And even then it does not always pan out."

"I should think it wouldn't be worth it," said Carlton.

"I often wonder myself."

The car stopped in front of a grubby semi-detached house with a tiny front yard. The windows were lit. A large hand-lettered placard in the front window read:

MADAME LA ZONGA
PALMS READ FORTUNES TOLD TAROT CARDS

"Madame La Zonga?" said Carlton.

"People pay more money if they think you're foreign than if they know you're from Bethnal Green," I said.

Hornchurch offered to stay in the car, but I insisted he come along with us.

We huddled in the doorway out of the rain, and I rang the bell. Mrs. Griswold opened the door. I had not seen her for more than a year but she had not changed: still enormously fat, her sparse gray hair tightly coiled under a transparent harinet. She wore a thick orange sweater, paisley shawl, and garnet earrings. And as always, she was eating something.

She swallowed and took my hand affectionately. "Aubrey, my boy!" she cried. "And Mr. Hornchurch, how delightful to see you both again. What a pleasure, it's been ages. Do come in out of this filthy rain. Come in and have a cup of tea with old Binnie."

It was good to be back in Binnie Griswold's house. Her parlor was cozy, a cheery fire going in the grate. The room was tricked out with the props of her profession: fringed lamps, beaded curtains, a stuffed owl, hanging plants. A crystal ball sat atop the upright piano, which held sheet music from Victor Herbert's "Girl of the Golden West." Spooked by the stuffed owl, Carlton sat far away from it on the sofa. Hornchurch, ever observant of protocol, did not sit down, but he did accept Mrs. Griswold's offer of a cup of tea and a praline. I seated myself in the worn leather chair which had been my perch during our lessons. For hours on end I had sat there while Mrs. Griswold strove to instill in me the basic principles of supernatural phenomena.

"And who is this handsome young man?" Mrs. Griswold asked when she returned with the tea tray. "He's not a special, he's an ordinary."

"She means you're not gifted," I explained to Carlton.

"I'm a friend of Aubrey's, Mrs. Griswold," Carlton stared at her as if he expected her to turn into a dragon at any moment.

"How nice," she said, settling into a worn mustard-colored wing chair. "Aubrey was one of my most gifted pupils. If only he had a better brain, he could be one of the top psychics in London." She picked up her teacup, pinkie extended daintily. "What is your name, young man?"

"Carlton Rossiter."

"Now don't tell me what's happened." Mrs. Griswold put her teacup down on the table by the chair and ate a praline. "Is there a curse on you? No, there's a curse on

someone close to you. Someone you love dearly. She's in grave danger."

"Why, that's amazing!" Carlton cried. I knew Mrs. Griswold loved to show off. Her smile grew broader, and she ate another praline. With her mouth full, she said:

"I see—I see great wickedness." She put a stubby hand to her forehead and closed her eyes. "An evil that has been alive for centuries, that has claimed many lives." Her eyes opened and focused on me. "And your lives are all in danger, not just the girl's."

"We're up against a coven of black witches, Mrs. Griswold," I said. "Perhaps you know of them? Theodora DuFarge and Olive Hamilton."

Mrs. Griswold sat up with a sharp intake of breath. "Theodora DuFarge? I should say I do know her. Oh, Aubrey, what's a twit like you doing up against a woman like that?"

"It's fate, Mrs. Griswold," I said, stung.

My former teacher turned her gaze to Hornchurch. "Mr. Hornchurch, you must dissuade him from taking on Theodora DuFarge. That would be suicide."

"It is too late, madam," said Hornchurch.

"Oh, dear." Her carpet-slipped foot tapped on the rug. "If I were younger—but I don't have the stamina anymore. So what have you done to get yourself in the soup this time, Aubrey? Tell me all about it." She took another praline.

Although my feelings were bruised, I did not let that impair my description of the situation with Daphne, the witches, the Book of Shadows, and Mongo. Mrs. Griswold nodded and ate pralines.

When I had finished, she stroked her chin. "There is only one way to find them so they won't know about it. I'll have to do it. They do not know me. I must consult the Oracle." She sighed. "I don't like to, the thing has such common manners, but it can't be helped. I must do what I can. Help me up, will you?"

We sat around Mrs. Griswold's dining table, Mrs. Griswold at the head. Hornchurch took a post by the door from which he could look on respectfully.

Mrs. Griswold arranged before her a glass of brandy, a stick of sandalwood incense in a ceramic holder, an almondwood wand, and a small packet of hemlock. She lit the incense with a wooden kitchen match. The smell of sandalwood—an odor I find repulsive—filled the cramped little dining room. She poured an inch of brandy into a chipped china saucer, sprinkled a bit of hemlock on it, and set it on fire.

Lifting the almondwood wand, she waved it over the pool of brandy, humming a tuneless melody. We all stared at her with rapt attention. Suddenly her head snapped back, and Mrs. Griswold fell back in a trance against her chair. Her mouth fell open, and a deep male voice completely unlike her own came out:

"Oh, ancient and venerable Oracle, appear before us and tell us what we wish to know, oh, ancient and wise one."

A small weak-chinned face, topped incongruously

with a cloth handkerchief wound round the forehead, appeared a foot above the brandy. Carlton gulped and clutched my arm.

"What do you want?" the head demanded sullenly.

Mrs. Griswold lay still. "Oh, wise and wonderful one," the deep voice said, "we have summoned you forth to ask a boon of you."

"Get out of it," the head sneered.

"No, really," I said hastily, and glanced at Mrs. Griswold. She did not move, her mouth hanging open. "We're trying to track down some witches, oh wise one. A coven of witches, or perhaps just two witches. We don't really know."

It snickered. "Regular font of information, you are."

"Good Lord, we're not supposed to be," I snapped, patience going. "*You are!*"

The Oracle sniffed. "Kindly address me in a more respectful mode, or I shall fold up me tent and silently steal away, I should think."

Abruptly the deep voice again boomed out of Mrs. Griswold: "Oh, ancient and venerable Oracle, we wish to know where we may find the witch who calls herself Theodora DuFarge, and the whereabouts of a Ming Dynasty vase that was once Daphne Oakeshott."

"That's my fiancée," Carlton told the Oracle.

Apparently the nasty thing had a soft spot for young love. It smiled at Carlton. "That's better," it remarked. "Much more like it. Your fiancée, you say?"

"Yes, and it means ever so much to me to get her back. I love her most awfully. Please help us," Carlton begged.

"Oh, all right," it said, shimmered in the air, and vanished. I looked again at the motionless Mrs. Griswold.

A picture formed where the Oracle had been floating. It was transparent and hard to understand but still a picture: a large blue lake with trees around it.

Carlton stared. "You know, Aubrey, that looks awful like Crowsdon Lake, doesn't it?"

"I've never seen it," I said.

Pictures of a forest, a garden, and rosebushes appeared in rapid succession, like the song slides I used to watch in the cinema as a small child. But this was not getting us anywhere.

"Oh, ancient," I pleaded, "we do not understand."

The Oracle reappeared.

"It's *at* Crowsdon, you twit," it said. "I thought it was bleeding obvious, myself."

"At Crowsdon?" I said. "Now, how could they possibly be at Crowsdon? We'd have known *that*."

"That's not me problem, mate. I'm only an humble Oracle, who was once a carefree water sprite before that old bag sitting there turned me into a bleeding stereopticon. If you're going to get hostile, I shall withdraw."

The kerchiefed head whiffed away, making an exclamation which implied that we were not the class of diviners it was accustomed to associating with.

"Get him back, Aubrey!" Carlton cried, staring at the unconscious Mrs. Griswold. "Wake her up."

"No, we can't wake a woman in a trance. It's too dangerous." I gazed helplessly at the brandy.

"Offer it anything. Anything! We can't let it get away now!" Carlton cried.

"Did I hear you say 'anything'?" said the Oracle, popping back into view.

"You!" I screamed in relief.

"Wonderful old Oracle!" burst out Carlton.

"Welcome back, sir," said Hornchurch.

The Oracle preened itself. "Did somebody call me name?" it asked coyly.

"Please, please tell us where the coven is meeting and where they are and where Daphne is, please," I whimpered.

"On one condition," said the Oracle.

"Anything!"

"I'll tell you on condition that she sets me free." It looked at Mrs. Griswold.

"No!" came the deep voice out of the old lady's mouth.

"How does one go about that?" I asked quickly.

"She's my master, see, and all she has to do is say, 'Oh, ancient and venerable Oracle (I love that bit), you are free.' Tell her to try it once, just to see if it works. I'll pop right back, I promise."

"No!" came the voice again. "I order you to give them the information."

"Make me," said the Oracle.

I turned nervously to Mrs. Griswold, or whatever it was that was speaking out of her. "Mrs. Griswold, our lives depend on this. Please."

Still lying back in her chair, Mrs. Griswold opened one eye and looked at me. "Oh, all right," she said in her normal voice, and sat up again. "You always bring me the worst luck, Aubrey. Forgive the phony trance, but I have a seance coming up tomorrow night and I needed the practice." She glared at the Oracle. "You drive a hard bargain, you naughty thing. You will not go free until you tell these people all, and if you don't make yourself crystal clear, you shall spend the rest of your unnatural lifetime floating above puddles of flaming brandy."

The Oracle perceived that Mrs. Griswold meant business. "All right then," it said. "Here's the dope: the coven meets at the north edge of Crowsdon Lake. There's a place there where they hold their sabbat. The one you call Theodora is the High Priestess of the coven. The one you call Olive is her second in command. They turned Daphne Oakeshott into a Ming vase to teach her old dad a lesson for daring to interfere with their getting the Book of Shadows. They're right mad. They're going to sacrifice Daphne at the sabbat, and then they're going to wipe out the whole lot of you." ♦

Men of Good Will



J. R. Dunn

1

Marcus Tatius paused at the top step. This area had been flattened by Roman artillery when the city was taken, and like most of the buildings, the villa was new. A low structure, built on an open plan with plenty of windows to let in the sun. The kind of thing a well-to-do merchant would build as a summer domus.

His leg had stiffened on the ride from the coast. Shifting the case to his left hand, Tatius reached down to rub his calf. It wasn't the pain that bothered him, it was the way it slowed him down, made every action

Illustration by Jael

twice as hard as it should be. Even so, he had to consider himself lucky—the wound had been deep, and by all rights he should have been left with a stump. One more wooden-legged veteran living on a pension—he would not have been able to bear that. Thank the gods for what little they saw fit to give.

He drew himself up and walked to the door. Stifling an urge to look behind him, he unlocked it and stepped inside. The front rooms were empty, as he'd expected. He limped through to the atrium. A dry pool topped by a fountain in the form of a cast-iron nereid holding a jug stood in the center. He gave it no more than a glance. Claudian was waiting in the doorway just past it.

"Ave," the younger man said, then blurted, "We've got trouble."

Tatius felt the warm spring day grow chill around him. "What?"

"Troops. This morning. They pushed in when I opened the door. The centurio asked me a lot of questions."

Tatius grunted and entered the other wing.

"I didn't tell them anything," Claudian said, following him.

"I didn't say you did, son."

The room was nearly empty. A cot, a few chairs, a small table with some sheets lying on top. Tatius sat down, hiding his relief as he straightened his leg. He gestured Claudian to the opposite chair. "They know what we're doing?"

"No. They knew we were Vigiles, but that's all. The centurio said that the procurator sent them." Claudian paused, then went on more quietly. "I got the impression that they were throwing their weight around."

Nodding, Tatius rubbed his temples. It never failed—the bureaucrats always jumped in as soon as they sniffed a vigilis about. Old optimates, most of them, and utterly worthless. Obsessed with what they called the "Republican virtues." As a rule they despised the security organs and did everything they could to interfere: withholding cooperation, crying to Rome, leaking information to the press.

He thought of the Hibernian debacle ten years back. Five men dead, three by torture, and the entire intelligence network among the Erse chieftains destroyed because the praefectus—the island didn't rate anything higher—hadn't been able to keep his mouth shut around his barbarian aides.

That wouldn't happen here. He'd go to the palace immediately, talk to the procurator before he decided to make a public address condemning the big bad vigiles. Octavius Priscus—that was the name. An old aristocratic family: not a good sign. Probably a career civil servant. "Let's drop that and go on," he said. "Now where is Gaius?"

"I don't know," Claudian said, looking away. "I haven't been able to contact him."

Tatius closed his eyes and cursed softly. Hearing Claudian shift nervously, he forced calm on himself. It was no more than he'd expected, and besides, Britons were supposed to be cold, phlegmatic types. He smiled to himself. A hard standard to live up to.

"Legatus, I . . ."

"No." Tatius raised a hand. "You're not to blame."

"He . . . he seems to do things his own way."

Grunting agreement, Tatius got up and stepped to the window. Most of the southwest quarter of the city was visible from here. Not a displeasing prospect, if you went for cut stone. "You don't like him, do you?"

The only answer was a sigh, to which Tatius responded, "Well, son, I don't either."

"There's something wrong with him." Claudian's voice was tight. "The first time I met him he was waiting by the door. He had a short sword. He grabbed me from behind and put it to my throat, told me to think fast—and he laughed about it."

Tatius rubbed his chin. There was something wrong with Gaius, all right. The medici had a word for what he was, a *dionysae*, someone subject to uncontrollable passions, in his case usually of a destructive nature. Tatius wouldn't have thought of using him if an alternative had been available. Once there had been teams for this kind of operation, but they'd been abolished by Antonius as incompatible with Roman honor. He grimaced. That was one term as princeps that would better have been filled by a trained *Ethiope* baboon.

He turned back to Claudian, who was staring red-faced at the table. "Don't let him bother you," Tatius said quietly. "Maybe we'll drop him."

Claudian's face brightened. "But don't count on it," Tatius added quickly. "It's probably too late to bring anyone else in." He sat back down wearily. "I understand Leo has been released."

Claudian nodded. "The court let him out on a *Habeas writ*. He'd committed no crime. . . ."

"No crime? Since when is inciting to riot not a crime?"

"It seems he was within his rights under local law,"

Claudian said with a shrug.

Tatius chuckled deep in his throat. Local law. Couldn't forget about that, now, could he?

He'd thought the arrest was too good to be true. A simple matter—a few forged papers, then hustle Leo out to Antonopolis and aboard a navy ship, and that would have been the end of it. But he'd felt in his bones that this operation wouldn't be that easy; they never were in this part of the world.

Grabbing the case, he got up. "I'd better get to the palace. No telling what His Excellency will do if I don't talk to him first. If Gaius drops in, tell him to wait right here."

He was turning to the door when Claudian picked something up from the table. "Perhaps you'll want to look at this, Legatus," he said, his voice a whisper.

Frowning, Tatius swung back. Claudian was holding out a pamphlet. "This is?" Tatius said as he took it.

"A kind of . . . report. On Leo."

"I read your report on the ship."

"No." A shake of the head. "Not mine. One of his people."

Tatius riffled the pages. Cheap Aegyptian paper, gray and blotchy, not up to Roman standards. He nodded to himself. One of the minor mysteries of this affair was

where Leo's crew was hiding their printing press. Private presses were illegal here, as they were in most provinces of the Ecumene. He inspected the print. A hand press, evidently, the type broken and worn.

He looked up. There was an odd expression on Claudian's face, one of near-pleading. "All right," Tattius said as he turned to the door. "I'll look it over."

He walked slowly across the atrium to the other wing, head down, frowning at the tiles. Matters were a lot worse than he'd bargained for. Gaius in one of his demented phases, the bureaucrats poking around. He sighed. He needed at least three trained men and a complete support group. What he had was a maniac and a boy fresh out of the Academy. Claudian, now . . . he seemed to have something on his mind. Back in Rome they'd been on a first-name basis, but now it was "Legatus this, Legatus that." Probably just the trouble with Gaius, that and natural first-mission nerves.

Stepping away from the house, he heard a puttering sound overhead. He shaded his eyes against the afternoon sun. Above him a navolucer flew on patrol. He watched as it passed, vast and bulky against the cloudless sky.

Ah, this wasn't the world he'd been born into! His entire village would have fled in terror, Roman and barbarian alike, if they'd seen a thing like that when he'd been a boy.

It swung side-on to him and he saw the thunderbolt painted on the gas-filled sac above the gondola, showing that it had been dedicated to Jove. Below that was the unit crest. He squinted as he tried to make it out: the XII Fulminata, one of his old outfits.

He smiled and went down the steps. It wasn't a disaster, not yet. A little luck and things would work out fine—and he was used to making his own luck.

Once inside the currus he sat back, resting his head on the seat. It had been a hard trip, and he was tired. He fought off an urge to drowse and looked about him. The currus was an old model, the leather upholstery worn in spots. A Phaeton, built by Eureka Machina. Like all the other currus manufacturers, they claimed to go straight back to the original machina societas founded by Archimedes, something Tattius strongly doubted, though it did make a good selling point. Strange, but he'd heard that the Franks were making the best ones these days. . . .

The driver, a signifer from the Antonopolis base, turned for instructions. Tattius told him to go to the palace.

A blank look crossed the lad's face. "Ere," he said. "I don't know how to get there."

Tattius rolled his eyes. Leave it to the navy to give him a man who didn't know his way around. "You've never been to the capital?"

The signifer shook his head. "Take a right at the end of the street," Tattius said.

As they started moving, he flicked through the pamphlet. He couldn't understand why Claudian had called it a report. More like religious propaganda, designed to win converts, all about Leo's exploits over the past three years. Of course, it didn't use the code name, or even Joshua, as he was known here in Judaea. The tract was

written in Greek, and the name had been Hellenized to Jesus.

The driver called for directions. Folding the pamphlet, Tattius put it away.

2

It took nearly an hour to reach the palace. The Jews were holding one of their feasts, and Jerusalem was packed with pilgrims: agricolae, merchants, the kind of trash any large gathering attracted. There were plenty of money-changers in evidence, and men with cages containing doves, lambs and other small animals. That puzzled Tattius until he recalled the sacrifice required by the Jews' god-in-a-box.

At each corner stood two or more soldiers, armed and dressed for combat.

They moved at a crawl, often coming to a halt as the crowd surged around them. For the most part the Jews ignored the currus—they weren't rare in Judaea; Tattius saw several belonging to wealthy merchants—but a few gave them foul looks and once a filthy-looking creature, one of their back-country prophets, shrieked at him in that outlandish language of theirs. Twice they waited while troops searched a wagon ahead.

The city had changed since he'd last seen it, and he lost his way after only a few blocks. For a quarter of an hour they crept through back alleys until he caught sight of the palace through a gap in the buildings.

The square was empty except for a handful of pedestrians and a testudo, the standard armored currus, parked next to the statue of Athena in the center. The testudo was surrounded by troops dressed in tan uniforms in the Parthian style, leggings and short-sleeved tunics. Tattius directed the driver to the palace stairway and was getting out when a decurio who looked ten years too young for his rank walked up, followed by two riflemen.

"Excuse me . . ." the officer began. Tattius handed him his papers. He looked them over, eyebrows going up, and raised his arm to salute. "I beg your pardon, ere. We're supposed to keep the square clear, but you'll be all right."

Tattius took back the papers. They said nothing about the vigiles, merely that he was a legion legatus on detached duty. "Is the procurator in?"

"Yes. He's sitting it out until this carnival is over."

"Any trouble?" Tattius asked, nodding at the troop barrier.

The officer shrugged. "Nothing yet, but it's coming. The Sicarii won't let a feast go by without pulling something."

Tattius slipped his ID back into his tunic. "Well, keep 'em on their toes, son." Saluting once more, the decurio walked off.

Telling the driver to keep up steam, Tattius climbed the stairs. Two guards stood at the entrance in ceremonial gear: cuirass, greaves and crested helmets. The centurio checked his papers again before directing him to the procurator's office. Tattius thanked him and went in.

The office was on the fourth floor. He took the stairs

slowly, pausing once to rub his leg. In Rome and some of the larger provincial capitals there was a new machina, a kind of cage hoisted by cables from floor to floor of the taller buildings. Too much to hope for in this place, needless to say.

The stairs led up to a long hallway ending in a pair of massive doors. In front of them a small man in a business toga sat at a scrinium. The scribe looked up questioningly as Tattius approached. Blank-faced, Tattius dropped his case onto the scrinium with a bang. "Legatus Tattius to see the procurator."

"Do you have an appointment?"

"No," Tattius said. "But I think he'll speak to me."

The man blinked at him a few seconds then got up. "I'll see if he's available."

Tattius waited until the door swung open, then walked around the scrinium. The scribe froze as he looked back to see Tattius bearing down on him. Tattius gave him a grin and pushed into the office.

The procurator was seated behind his own scrinium, a large thing of dark heavy wood, writing with an old-fashioned plume. He looked up as Tattius entered, eyes made huge by the bifoci he was wearing. "I have the pleasure . . ." he said.

"Legatus Marcus Tattius of the Opera Vigiles. I understand you're expecting me."

The procurator slipped off the vitros and set them down. "I'm expecting someone," he said in a low voice. He gestured at the scribe and Tattius heard the door close.

Priscus rose slowly. He was a tall man, thin and balding, dressed in a formal toga edged with purple. He eyed Tattius for a moment, then stalked over. "Legatus," he said, his voice soft and harsh, "Let me make one thing clear. I am not a vigiles-hater. I realize that the work you do is necessary, foul as it may be at times. But . . ." He paused, and his voice grew even quieter. "I will not have any private wars in my province. I have contacted Rome about this matter and I have been told *nothing*."

His voice rose on the last word, and he visibly calmed himself. "Evidently this is some sort of in-house operation on your part. I expect you to tell me what is going on in complete detail." He swung around and walked to a couch at the end of the room, gesturing Tattius to a chair.

As Tattius sat down a wave of exhaustion struck him, and he had to force himself not to slump. Straightening up, he looked around the room. It was large and well furnished, though not to the point of luxury. A map of the world took up most of one wall, and atop various cabinets were busts of the great princes going back to the Reformation: Gracchus, Cato, Octavian. Behind the scrinium was a portrait of the current first citizen, a machina picture, the kind they called a tabula lumen. He frowned at it. The picture showed Pompey to the life, but something was lacking—the grandeur that should be embodied by the leader of the Roman Ecumene. Give me an oil painting any day, Tattius thought.

Turning back to Priscus, Tattius spotted a book on the table and smiled as he recognized the cover: Nicephorus's *On the Sublimity of Progress*. A spined edition, the

same that Tattius had in his case. His lips twisted. He would have thought a man of Priscus's class would have bought the scroll.

He noticed something else peeping from under the book, the paper gray, the pages dog-eared and torn. He was bending for a closer look when the procurator cleared his throat.

Priscus was leaning back on the couch, resting his head on one hand, a typically infuriating optimate pose. Tattius grimaced at him and started speaking. "We have an operation under way in Judaea. . . ."

"Obviously," Priscus said, his eyes shut.

"There's a preacher by the name of Joshua ben Joseph, from a small village to the north of here . . ."

"Nazareth in Galilee."

Tattius fell silent. Opening his eyes, Priscus gave him a slight smile.

"Well, he's been preaching for some time now, how long we don't know, and he's gathered a small band of followers. Recently, he declared himself to be the messiah, which is . . ."

"I know what it is."

Suppressing his irritation, Tattius went on. ". . . and considering conditions in Judaea, and beyond that the international situation, we think it necessary to extract and hold him."

Priscus's smile widened and then, incredibly, he began to laugh. Rising from the couch, he walked to the table, opened a carved box and took out a fumena. He lit it and leaned against the scrinium. "I take it this scheme was dreamed up in Rome?" he said, letting out a puff of smoke.

Tattius frowned at the burning cylinder. Filthy habit. He'd never picked it up, even though he'd served in Nova Mundus. "Yes."

"And does anyone involved have the least knowledge of this province?"

"I do myself," Tattius said. "My first tour was in Judaea."

"Then you're aware that these hedge-preachers come in bushels here?"

"Your Excellency . . ."

Raising a hand, Priscus said, "Hear me out. I know more of this situation than you give me credit for. I've been following it since ben Joseph arrived in Jerusalem. I spoke to the man! A mad and simple fellow, obsessed with his faith and his god. No harm in him whatsoever. Do you think I'd have released him otherwise?" Head wreathed with smoke, he butted the fumena out. "No, you're dropping a bucket into a dry well here, my friend."

Tattius glanced back at the table. "Did you happen to ask where his press is hidden?"

"What's that?"

Reaching to the table, Tattius jerked the pamphlet out from under the book. "Nicephorus and ben Joseph," he said, slapping it against his palm. "An odd combination."

"Perhaps so," the procurator said tonelessly. "Perhaps not as much as you'd think."

"So you didn't ask."

"I doubt if ben Joseph knows. An unworldly figure. Doesn't care a damn how his message is spread."

"I wonder how many of these are floating around," Tattius muttered.

"Thousands, no doubt."

Sighing, Tattius tossed the pamphlet back. "Excellency," he said. Priscus crossed his arms, giving him his full attention. "You asked what I know about Judaea. Let me tell you. When I was serving here, another messiah appeared. Judah of Galilee, he called himself. Same area, you notice—scorpion's nest, always has been. Anyway, this Judah gathered an army of several thousand men, told them he was the anointed one from that royal house of theirs, that he was going to defy Rome and set up a kingdom just like the old days. It took us two years to put that rebellion down. They hid up in the high country, and we had to go in and root them out. I was there, and I've never seen worse, not even in Nova Ionia." He got up and took a step toward Priscus. "A lot of Roman boys died in those hills. Do you want to chance that again?"

He noticed that Priscus was staring at his leg. "No. That didn't happen here. That was somewhere else."

Giving Priscus no time to reply, he went to the map on the far wall. "Also," he said, rapping his knuckles on the blank area north of Scythia, "you may not be aware of what's been happening on the steppes over the last year." He turned to face Priscus. "Well, I am here to tell you that Rome is facing its biggest challenge since Carthage. We'll be at war with the Ch'in in a matter of months—we're at war now for all practical purposes. They're barbarians, but there's a lot of them, and they've allied themselves with the steppe tribes, the best light cavalry on earth. We'll beat them, but it'll be tough—and we don't need any revolts behind our lines while we're doing it. If it starts here it'll spread—to Parthia, Armenia, who knows where. I'm here to see that it does not happen."

He stepped away from the map, not taking his eyes from the procurator. "And that's why I'm interested in this messiah."

Priscus pursed his lips. "I know full well what's occurring in Asia, Legatus . . ."

"Oh?" Tattius's eyebrows rose. "Then perhaps you'll explain why a procurator of the Ecumene is ignoring a potential revolt in his province?"

Lunging from the scrinium, the procurator stared down at him. "Don't you speak in that manner to me . . . vigilis."

Tattius gazed calmly back. "You were going to say 'barbarian,' weren't you?"

Priscus gave him a thin smile. "My wife," he said precisely, "is Parthian."

He whirled away and walked to the windows, toga flapping behind him. He stood in silence just long enough to antagonize Tattius before facing him once more.

"We're going nowhere with this."

"I take my orders from Rome."

"I hope you're not asking for support from me."

"Don't require it. I just don't want any interference."

"Very well," Priscus said. Glaring at Tattius, he lit another fumena. "But one thing more, and you *will* listen."

He pointed the brown stick at Tattius. "Do you know the nature of the festival the Jews are celebrating?"

Tattius shrugged. He'd never paid any attention to their weird rites.

"It's called the Passover. It marks their liberation from the Aegyptian tyrants centuries ago. Do you know what that means?"

"The Sicarii . . ."

"The Zealots. I'll have none of your soldierly slang here. They make a point of creating disturbances during this feast. When I first arrived, these were full-fledged riots. I've reduced them to next to nothing, and this year it has been nothing." He gazed at Tattius emotionlessly. "I intend to see it remains so. As will you. There will be no Hebron massacre under my governorship."

Tattius waved a hand. "That worked."

The procurator's face paled, and for a moment Tattius thought he had gone too far. Priscus held his gaze for a moment, then dropped his head. "I repeat, Legatus: I want no public uproar as a result of your activities. I demand it. If such occurs, be certain that I will see to you."

Stepping behind the scrinium, Priscus sat down and put on his bifoci. "You've had a long and noble career in the service of Rome, Legatus, of that I'm sure. It would be a pity to end it in such a fashion."

Smirking, Tattius went to pick up his case. "As you say, Excellency."

The procurator nodded without looking up. Tattius moved to the door. "A final point," Priscus called out.

Tattius turned to see him still bent over his desk.

"Yes?"

"I hope you're not working with the Sanhedrin. The priesthood is for the most part loyal, but there is a faction that's questionable. I've been told that this faction would like to see ben Joseph dead."

Tattius waited until Priscus raised his head. "Rest assured," he said mildly. The procurator gave him a cold smile. "Good day, Legatus."

"Good day, etc."

He walked into the hallway and nodded to the scribe, who ignored him. Once outside he paused to inspect the city. It was nothing like it had been when he'd last seen it . . . what, twenty years ago? Most of the buildings were new: government munae, a Roman temple, a hospital with the caduceus of Apollo atop the roof. Outside the walls he could see a large officina on the hill where they used to hold public executions. As he watched, a whistle blew and the workers emerged to head home.

He heard a shout and looked down to see a wagon entering the square, driven by a bearded Jew wearing merchant's robes. Walking up to it with his arms raised was the decurio, followed by his squad. As they surrounded the wagon the merchant feigned astonishment, then got down to argue with the officer while it was searched. He struck his head, his chest, then held his arms to heaven, asking the prophets to witness his tribulations. The decurio waited patiently, but it was some time before the merchant finally broke down and presented his papers.

Tattius shook his head. The Ecumene had done so much for these people. When the Romans arrived they

had been a dying culture, split into factions, exploited by that priesthood of theirs. Rome had brought them peace, prosperity and civilization, and how had she been thanked? With defiance in the streets and rebellion in the hills.

But he was tired, and that no doubt colored his outlook. That and the confrontation with Priscus. He ought to have handled the man better, but aristocrats infuriated him so. Limping down the marble steps he got into the circus. The merchant was still arguing as they drove off.

3

The inn was old and in a poor section, but he recalled it from earlier days and had no time to look for better. Tattius felt himself lucky to find a room at all with the festival in progress. He chased the driver off to the local barracks and went upstairs.

He had a meal sent up and ate without paying much attention, which was just as well, as it wasn't very good. Afterward he lay back on the bed without removing his tunic, eyes closed, too weary to sleep.

He'd returned to the villa to find that Gaius had not appeared, although he'd sent a message saying that he'd be there in the morning. Claudian had still been moody, anxious to know if Tattius had read the tract, which he still called a report. Tattius had told him, a little too sharply, that it was worthless.

He rubbed his neck, wondering what was bothering the boy. Well, no matter; he'd come around.

He pushed himself up against the pillows—an eastern luxury, but welcome at his age—and reached for his case. Unlocking it, he slipped out Nicephorus's book, then settled back.

On the Sublimity of Progress had been a best seller for months in Iberia and Italy—uncommon for a philosophical work—but that wasn't the reason that Tattius had bought it. He'd been interested in philosophy for most of his life, and had read a lot of it: Aristotle, Confucius, the now discredited Plato. With the life he had led, traveling from one end of the Ecumene to the other, operating in secret, often involved in situations that offended his sense of virtue, Tattius required a larger view of the world than the average military officer. Reading the Stoics, Epicurians and Cynics had provided this, allowing him to place in his actions in a wider context.

But no school of thought appealed to him more than the Pragmatics. They held that the measure of man must be found in relation to the world itself, with no appeal to idealism or metaphysics, that the ultimate, unsolvable questions of existence should be ignored in favor of those open to logical inquiry.

Nicephorus of Samos was the current spokesman of the school. Tattius had read some of his earlier essays, finding them so closely argued as to be bewildering. He'd been pleased to discover that the new work was more clearly written, as if Nicephorus wished his conclusions to be as widely read as possible.

The book began with a short history of the great industrial upsurge at the end of the Hellenistic Period: how

Archimedes had met the plagues which had annihilated much of the slave population of Sicily by building machinery capable of handling simple work, how the devices were made more complex by his own slave Kiro, and on through Hero, Pollio and Rufus to point where steam was harnessed, electrical fluid discovered and the first flying machinery constructed.

From there Nicephorus went into his argument: that the spread of industrial power possessed a virtue in and of itself which he called "progress"; that this factor fostered social good at the same time that it banished human misery; that its appearance was no accident but in fact the goal of mankind and that it would eventually create the truly just society postulated by such earlier thinkers as Socrates and Octavian.

It all fit in well with Tattius's own experiences, his belief in the civilizing mission of Rome. He rested the book on his chest, thinking again how fortunate it was that Rome had conquered Sicily just as Archimedes completed his pioneering work.

He wondered what Priscus made of the book. Under ordinary circumstances Tattius would have discussed it with him—he had few opportunities to speak with educated men—but today that had been out of the question. The procurator would probably have been shocked to learn that he could even read.

And that pamphlet—the idea of studying such a piece of oriental trash along with the work of a true philosopher! Tattius chuckled as he opened the book once more. What had Priscus said . . .

There was a knock on the door. Tossing the book aside, he grabbed the case and pulled out his pistol. It was a volvus, six shots, one round already in the chamber. He pulled back the hammer as he got up. The rap came again. Tattius reached the door and stood to one side. "Yes?"

"Papers," said a low voice.

Tattius cursed under his breath. After all he'd been through today . . . Priscus had probably sent them, as a gesture. He slipped the weapon in his tunic and reached for the lock. We'll see about that. Grabbing the handle, he flung the door open.

There was only one soldier in the hallway, a centurio in uniform but with no helmet. An older man, gray hair shaven to stubble and face wrinkled with years. The wrinkles deepened as he smiled. "What are you doing in my town, civis?"

Tattius gaped at him. "Aridius . . ."

The centurio stepped forward, enfolding Tattius in a bearhug, laughing and slapping him on the back. Tattius gripped his arm and pulled him inside. "You old devil—get your ass in here."

Aridius raised his eyebrows as he glanced around the room. "I thought the vigiles paid better than this."

"Oh, I remembered it from the old days. Here, have a seat." He went to the bullpup and gave it a yank. "How'd you track me down?"

"You think anything happens here without me knowing it? No—one of my boys came off duty with a tale about a rogue legatus wandering around and I got the

rest from a lost sailor who stumbled in looking for a bed." His face wrinkled again. "Legatus . . . if I'd known you'd make that back when we were in Thrace . . ."

Another knock came and Tatus opened the door to see the inn's boy gazing up at him dull-wittedly. He handed him a couple of sesterces and told him to bring up a jug of wine, the best they had, and to be quick about it. "So they sent you back to Jerusalem?" he said as he shut the door.

"Full circle," Aridius nodded. "Better off than last time around, though. I'm in charge of ground security."

"Glad to hear it," Tatus said. "Not as bad as our day, I hope."

"Nowhere near. We've got the Sicarii on their knees." "I hear you've been using the navolucers in the back woods."

"The gasbags? Can't beat 'em, Marcus. One hint of trouble and you're right on top of it. Too bad they weren't around back then."

The boy returned with the wine. Tatus poured two cups, watering his, and handed a full one to Aridius. Smiling gravely, he raised his own. "Comrades," he said.

For the next two hours they talked of other days. They had met at a training camp in Thrace, both of them scared recruits from the fringes of the Ecumene, Tatus from Britannia and Aridius from the northern reaches of Gaul. They'd gone through training together, then spent five years in the same unit, first in Judea putting down the Sicarii, then in Arabia Deserta to tame the last of the nomads and secure Rome's supply of naphtha, and on to those last wild months in Nova Ionia, beating back the savages trying to push the Roman colonies into the sea. Tatus had nearly left his bones there, his leg shattered by a spear while landing on a worthless island the red men were using as a base. He'd been invalidated out and sent back to Rome, to overcome a young man's despair at being crippled and find a career in the vigiles, while Aridius went on to Nova Iberia, the great northern continent empty of all but men scarcely above the level of beasts.

They'd run into each other several times as they did the work of empire, but not for over a decade, and they had much to talk about. Tatus told him what he could of his operations with the vigiles, wishing he could say more, that he didn't have to water his wine and could loosen up the way old troopers did. But he wasn't an old trooper, not really, and to loosen up was impossible.

"Did you ever marry?" Aridius asked as he filled his cup. They'd finished the first jug and were well along into the second.

Tatus smiled and shook his head. There had been women—more than his share, truth be told—but never one who could have endured life as the wife of a vigilis.

Aridius set the jug down. "I finally got caught. A good girl. Bactrian."

Tatus chuckled. "Like Alexander."

"Ah, she's no Roxanne. Young, though, and a fine breeder. Two sons, as well as a girl. The oldest is twelve. I'm going to send him to a collegium. No soldier's life for him."

Tatus nodded silently, hoping that the Ch'n would leave him that choice. His leg was aching again. As he reached down, Aridius waved his glass. "Still bother you, does it, Marcus? I'll remember that day to my grave. When that red bastard hit you, I thought you were gone."

"You and me both, friend." He straightened the leg, trying in vain to find a comfortable position, then lifted the jug. A little more wine would help. "You ever wounded?"

"Not to speak of. A few cuts here and there. Nothing to compare with you."

Tatus narrowed his eyes. "Thanks to the amulet, I suppose?"

Aridius nodded rapidly. Tatus threw his head back and roared.

"No, don't laugh. I still wear it." Untying his tunic, Aridius lifted out the amulet, a crude figure with a stylized sun behind it. He'd bought it at Delphi when they'd been on leave after training. "See?" He shook it on its chain.

"How many sesterces did you pay for that? And in gold, too."

"It was worth it." Aridius tucked the amulet back into his tunic. "I remember what you all said. Look at the dumb Frank. The Franks will buy any damn thing."

"And then you had it blessed by that old hag."

"She was a priestess!"

Tatus swept a hand at him and sipped the wine. "So whatever happened to that aide you had, the Nubian?"

"Dion? He's still around. I've got him with me now."

"No! He must be in his sixties."

"Oh, he retired a while back. I kept him on as a kind of servant. Can't do much anymore, but he's a good friend." He drained his glass and poured another. "Nearly lost him last week. Some kind of fever. The medici had already given up on him. So," he said with a smile, "I went to a holy man."

Tatus began to chuckle as Aridius went on. "A rabbi named Joshua, from north of here."

The sounds died in his throat and he leaned forward. ". . . now you go ahead and laugh, but I heard a lot about him before he ever got to Jerusalem. He healed a lot of people—madmen, lepers and so on. There was one tale that he brought a man back from the dead, but I didn't buy that—I'm not stupid." He took a gulp of wine and sat back to admire the cup.

"Go on," Tatus said.

"Well, I knew he was in town, so I paid him a visit. Couldn't take the old savage with me, he was too sick. I mean, he was in bad shape, Marcus. Anyway, I waited to speak to him—it was in the market, lot of people around, cripples, women with sick brats. I finally got to him, and I wasn't in uniform either, just an old robe, and he called me 'Centurio.' How do you like that?"

Tatus grimaced. As if the carpenter couldn't have seen him driving around on duty half a hundred times.

"Well," Aridius continued, "I told him the story and asked if he could stop by, and he just smiled and said—I can hear him this minute—'Go on home, Centurio, your faith has healed him.'"

Aridius sighed and shook his head. "He has a beautiful smile."

Tatius was about to speak when Aridius leaned forward. "And you know, I got home, and there was Dion, sitting up in bed drinking broth, when I'd left him near dead not an hour before."

He raised his eyebrows. "Now laugh at that. I'll tell you, we may think we know a bit these days with our machinae and all, but there's still a thing or two we haven't figured out yet." He drained the glass and smiled triumphantly.

Tatius settled back into the chair. "I heard about this rabbi myself. Isn't he in bed with the Sicarii?"

Aridius shot him a glare.

"But wasn't he in jail . . ."

"Aw, that." Aridius pushed the matter away. "That was the priests. You know what they're like. He broke up that thieves' den they've got at the temple and they had him pulled in. Turns out the moneychangers aren't supposed to be there in the first place, so the head priest went to Priscus and got him sprung."

Tatius looked down at the floor. So Priscus hadn't told him the whole story after all. Probably thought it would look as if he were under the Sanhedrin's thumb. What was the name of the current high priest? Hillel, that was it. He ought to look into it, if he could find the time. He couldn't ask Aridius anything more—for all his dumb Frank act, he was no fool; no man was who survived a career in the legions. He hadn't asked Tatius what he was here for; he knew better. A few more questions about Joshua and he'd put it together, all right.

He raised his head. "How do you know Dion wasn't faking?"

Laughing, Aridius aimed a kick at him. Tatius caught his booted foot and shoved him back into the chair.

"Still pretty quick, old man," Aridius said.

"As long as it doesn't involve footwork."

Chuckling, Aridius picked up the jug and shook it. He sighed and set it back down. "I hate to say it, Marcus, but I've got a long day tomorrow and I'll bet you do too."

"True enough." Tatius stood up and tested his bad leg. "Good to see an old trooper."

Aridius raised his arm. "They don't make 'em like us anymore."

"No, they don't," Tatius said. "Different times."

Going to the door, Aridius said, "You don't have to come downstairs if you . . ."

"Nonsense," Tatius barked. "You think I'm a cripple?" He stormed past Aridius and flung the door open, ushering him into the hall.

As they left the inn Aridius told him he didn't want to hear about him leaving Judaea until he met the family—the woman would cook a fine meal and he wanted Tatius's opinion about the boys. Tatius told him he wouldn't miss it; then they slapped each other's shoulders and Aridius started toward the center of town.

Tatius watched him go. Aridius walked steadily and showed no sign of the jug he'd put away, but a gaggle of rogues stood two blocks down and Tatius felt a mild concern. He needn't have worried; although two of them

turned as Aridius passed, they said nothing and he walked on undisturbed. Tatius smiled as he went back in. They didn't make them like that anymore.

Upstairs he decided on another half glass—he was far from drunk and it would help him sleep. He poured it out, holding back the water, then stepped into the hallway and out onto the wide balcony at the front of the building. It was filled with tables and couches, all empty. Maybe they served meals here in warmer weather.

Beyond the railing lay the nighttime city. Ill lit compared to Rome, all except for the center, which was awash with searchlights. The brisk wind brought him an odd keening sound. He cocked his head, puzzled, before recognizing it as the music of the Jews. A party, or one of their rituals.

He set the cup down and leaned against the railing. Odd, Aridius's tale about the carpenter, but not so much when you thought about it. The whole town must be talking about the latest messiah, and it was no surprise that Aridius had found his way to him. He was just bait for holy men—show him a priest, a witch or a shaman and he was lost. Tatius chuckled to himself, recalling how impressed Aridius had been by the Scythian tribal wizards—as if there weren't enough of those where he came from. And that business about Dion's illness! Utter nonsense. Fevers had been known to break before, and Nubians were a tough breed.

But it did trouble him. The more he heard, the more it seemed that Joshua was exactly what Priscus claimed, an innocent religious fanatic. Still, these eastern mystery cults were nothing but trouble. Mithra, Alaha, that fat little monk from Hind, the more grotesque the better. They were making inroads all over the Ecumene, even in Rome itself.

It was beyond his understanding. Although no believer himself, Tatius realized that it was necessary for the weak to have something to lean on, some power they could turn to in order to ease the bitterness of life. But why these bizarre oriental creeds? Wasn't the Pantheon enough?

Being yet another holy man didn't make Joshua harmless—he was still a danger in spite of himself. The Sicarii, desperate as they were, wouldn't find it hard to make use of him.

He stretched, nearly upsetting the cup. Yes . . . that was probably why he'd been jailed in the first place, to make a martyr of him. That priestly faction that wanted him dead—perhaps they'd even arranged to have him killed in the cells. A pretty situation: an announcement that the Romans had murdered the latest messiah, riots, more killings, a new lease on life for the rebels . . .

Priscus had mentioned the Hebron massacre. Tatius wondered if the procurator was aware that he'd been there. Unlikely—Priscus hadn't even known who he was until he presented himself, and the disaster at Hebron must be constantly on his mind.

He could almost picture the marketplace that day: the heat shimmering off the pounded dirt, the stench of dung, animals and unwashed bodies, the roar of the mob as it marched toward the legion lines.

Judea was still undeveloped at the time, and Hebron remained as it had been for millennia, a poor, primitive backwater, the perfect breeding ground for revolt. The XII Fulminata had been rushed to the city a day after Judah of Galilee made an inflammatory speech, arriving just as the pot boiled over.

Only a single century occupied the market—the others were searching the outskirts for the Sicarii agitators. One hundred men against a mob ten times their size—many of them, like Tattius and Aridius, just out of training.

They were depending on a new weapon, the Basilisk: a wheel-mounted, six-barreled gun turned by a hand crank that could put out six hundred rounds a minute. Their unit had three of them.

The mob had flared up out of nowhere, filling half the square in a matter of minutes. They halted about fifty yards from the troops as if at a barricade and stood cursing and shaking their fists. Men and women, all ages and classes. Every few feet the checkered headdress of a Sicarii was visible; most of the Sicarii's faces were turned toward the rioters, inciting them.

The centurio, a Hun named Otos, paced in front of the guns, striking his thigh with a baton. He paid no attention as rocks began to fly, or when a young Jew ran forth to pull up his robe and make an obscene gesture.

Tattius stood with his rifle primed, the hammer resting on the pan. This was his first real action—the patrols he'd been on in Jerusalem hadn't run into any trouble—and he felt a deep hollowness unlike anything he had ever experienced. The screams of the crowd seemed to be directed at him alone. The sun was blinding, and the heat was wearing him down—if he could have a moment's rest he'd be fine, but he didn't dare fall out. He glanced to where Aridius knelt next to one of the new guns, gripping a belt of ammunition. The Frank seemed completely calm as he gazed out at the mob. Tattius wiped the sweat off his face with his sleeve. He knew he didn't look that good.

He heard a cry and swung to his left. A legionnaire was down, hit by a rock. The centurio glanced at the fallen man and called for bayonets. Tattius fumbled as he slipped his over the barrel, nearly slashing his hand.

Something trailing smoke rose from the crowd. It fell short and exploded in a blossom of flame. The centurio raised his baton and stood frozen, like a magistrate about to call the start of the games. Another naphtha bomb flew, followed by a gunshot. The baton fell.

Tattius had not trained with the gun crews, and the staccato roar came as a shock. He shouldered his rifle and fired into the dense smoke pouring from the gun barrels, reloading according to drill, shooting again. Biting the cartridge, ramming it into the barrel—he lost count of how many times he fired before Otos appeared, demonic in the cloud of burnt powder, slashing his arms in a cutoff gesture.

The guns fell silent and only then did Tattius hear the screams and wails from beyond the smoke. Waving the baton, Otos vanished again and the century moved forward, bayonets raised. A shadow appeared before Tattius: a Jew holding the stump of his arm and moaning. He

fell to his knees, looking up with blank eyes as Tattius passed. A moment later he was through the smoke.

The Jews spoke of a place called Sheol, like Hades only worse. That was what Tattius walked into. Hundreds of bodies lay across the far end of the market, some writhing but most deathly still. The howls grew louder, and he could hear someone laughing madly.

Tattius came to a complete stop. Directly in front of him a woman crouched, her mouth a red hole gaping wide but with no sound emerging. Next to her a man crawled off, trying to stuff his viscera back into his body with one hand. Beyond him a priest moved among the bodies, turning them over, feeling the wrists and faces of the victims. His robe was red to the elbows.

He heard loud curses and turned his head. Several legionnaires had shouldered their rifles and were racing to the victims, even though shots were coming from the buildings. Otos shouted, waving his baton, and Tattius could see that even he had turned pale.

The troops went on through the killing ground, moving at a crouch. Tattius raised his bayonet but could not force himself to move. Something struck the ground near his boot, the crack of the shot following it. With a cry that was half-scream Tattius ran forward, past the woman, now rocking aimlessly, the gutted man who had collapsed in the dirt.

He nearly stumbled over a bundle lying on the ground. A child, separated from its mother. Tattius paused, and it looked up. As he reached down, a shot rang out and it screamed. Tattius took a step back and then turned to run on.

He fell into a doorway and crouched there, breathing harshly. A shadow loomed over him—a decurio leading a handful of men. He shouted something and vanished. Tattius nodded and set out after him.

It cost them four hours and ten men to clear the buildings. When Tattius returned to the marketplace the bodies were gone, but the hard-packed earth stank with the smell of the dead. The Basilisk battery remained in place. As Tattius stumbled past to the water skins he noticed Aridius sitting on the traces of one gun, and saw that the burnt powder on his face was streaked with white.

They had never discussed it, not in all the years since. The guns had never been used in the Ecumene before, and their effect was a shock to Roman and Jew alike. But they were a success. The Sicarii had abandoned Hebron and took to the hills a short time later.

There were better weapons now. Hand-held machine guns, breech-loading artillery, and other things that Tattius knew of only because of his position in the vigiles. Weapons that could turn a town like Hebron—or Jerusalem, or Rome—into a lifeless husk.

Tattius could picture it too easily. What did one Judean fanatic mean against that possibility? Absolutely nothing. He had killed better men than Joshua, and not a few of them. Much as they haunted his dreams—and they did, for he was not a hard man—he regretted none of them. He had killed for Rome, and Rome to him was everything—god, wife, family. He'd felt that ever since he'd been a boy, back when Britannia was still the frontier.

His father had been a soldier with the occupation forces, his mother a native, and he the outcast, the half-breed mocked and jeered at as he made his way to the Latin school through a stinking sty of a village inhabited by dirty, illiterate tribesmen. If it hadn't been for Rome he would have remained one of them, bowing down to a god in a tree or the hanging stones that the Britons said had been erected by giants. When his chance came to serve the Ecumene he had been grateful—blindingly, utterly grateful. Across all the years, that feeling had never left him.

His eyelids began to droop. He drained the cup and turned his back on the night city, feeling automatically for the pistol in his tunic. He could no longer hear the keening music. The night was quiet as he went inside.

4

He had the signifer drop him off three blocks from the villa and took his time walking over. He felt fine, none the worse after last night, his leg much better though still a bit stiff. He paused to look the place over. A few passersby, nothing out of the ordinary. There could be a watcher in another building, but there was nothing he could do about that.

He was crossing the front wing when a scrap of paper caught his eye. Bending clumsily, he picked it up, knowing what it was even before seeing the cover. Another one of the pamphlets, clean and unwrinkled, as if fresh from the press. He glanced around the room, empty except for balls of dust. He was certain it hadn't been here yesterday.

He was about to look further when he heard a burst of laughter, nasal and staccato, from the far wing. He grimaced and headed for the door. As he crossed the atrium he crumpled the tract and threw it in the fountain.

Claudius was sitting stiffly at the table, glaring at the figure sprawled in the chair across from him. He rose as Tattius entered, while the other man half-turned to give him a smile that lasted no more than a second.

"Ave, Gaius," Tattius said as he set his case down. "Glad you could stop by."

Gaius said nothing. He looked bad, considerably worse than when Tattius had last seen him, two years ago in Syria. His clothes were ragged and he'd lost a lot of weight. His cheekbones, always prominent, stuck out like blades, and there was a feverish glint in his eyes that Tattius didn't like—not that there was much about the man that Tattius did care for.

Gaius Labeo was the scion of an old equestrian family fallen on hard times. His father, who had been forced to go into trade, was a client of a senator from the Plebeian faction, one of the so-called "New Men." When Gaius reached his majority, his patron had arranged for a position in the vigiles, as if a youth spent carousing and gambling was the proper training for an intelligence officer. Gaius's new rank hadn't improved him any, and from there it had been downhill all the way.

Tattius gave up waiting for a reply and dragged a chair over. "How does it stand?" he said as he sat down.

Gaius said something Tattius didn't catch. He had a habit—deliberate, Tattius thought—of speaking so quietly he could barely be heard. Tattius checked the urge to lean closer. "Speak up," he said, reclining in the seat.

"Perfect," Gaius said, glancing up at Tattius but dropping his eyes immediately. "It's perfect."

"What is perfect? Details."

Gaius bent toward him. "They're having a late supper tonight, the lot of them, at a merchant's house outside the walls. We can drop the whole pack right . . ."

"We 'drop' no one," Tattius said sternly. "We're here to extract the carpenter, and that's all. I'll thank you to keep that in mind. Now where is this house?"

Gaius was opening his mouth to reply when a bearded figure filled the doorway. Without thinking, Tattius drew his pistol and leveled it. The man took a step backward but Tattius kicked back the chair and lunged at him. "Get in here," he said, gesturing with the barrel.

Nodding wordlessly, the man stepped inside. Tattius glanced back to see Claudian in shooter's stance, weapon gripped in both hands. Gaius sat calmly, chin resting on one hand, a smirk on his face.

Tattius poked his head out. The atrium was empty. Closing the door, he nudged the bearded man to the far wall. He was tall, overweight, dressed in the robes and shawl of the lower priesthood.

"Get your hands up," Tattius told him.

The priest did as he was told, backing away from Tattius until he thumped against the wall. Tattius halted with the pistol only a foot from his face. "Who are you?"

"This is Nathan ben Ezra," Gaius said. "He's working with us." The bearded man bobbed his head.

Tattius looked at Gaius, who smiled back insolently. Fighting an urge to wipe it off with the butt of the pistol, Tattius stepped toward him, taking care that Claudian had a clear shot. "Who told you to bring the Sanhedrin in?"

Gaius straightened up. "It was my decision. I was the man on the spot."

The priest cleared his throat. "We find that our interests in this case . . ."

"Be silent!" Tattius roared, whirling to face him. The priest lifted his hands once again. Tattius drew closer to Gaius. "How much does he know?"

"Nothing."

Tattius stared down at him, feeling his jaw muscles work. Gaius must have noticed. Blinking his eyes, he said quickly, "Very little. The minimum."

"Names, ranks?" Gaius shook his head rapidly.

Tattius went to the priest. Cocking the gun, he pointed it at the man's face. "I ought to put a hole in your head and leave you outside the wall for the vultures."

He stared into the man's eyes until he looked away. "But I am a Roman," he said finally, slipping the pistol into his tunic. "Get out."

The priest ran off without looking back. Tattius followed him, watching as he disappeared in a flurry of robes. At the table Gaius stared fixedly into space. Going over to him, Tattius leaned close. "Why?"

"They control the mob," Gaius said, nearly spitting the words. "We need bodies . . ."

"We need nothing."
"Oh? We're going to do it all ourselves, are we? That Ganymede over there"—Gaius waved at Claudian, who jerked up in the seat—"and you, a cripple?" His voice had risen and was starting to crack. "You had no right interfering in my operation!"

Grabbing Gaius's tunic, Tatus slapped him across the face once, then again, putting his weight into it. He flung Gaius into the chair and stood back, staring coldly. Gaius reached for his pouch, pausing with his hand on the strap. He sat poised for a moment, teeth clenched, eyes fixed on Tatus, then twisted his head away.

Smiling, Tatus turned his back. "Your operation, eh? Let me remind you, civis, that you are no longer an agent of the vigiles. You were chased out one step ahead of the noose, as I recall. You have no official status whatsoever. I have pulled you out of a dungheap and tossed you here solely because I have use for you. You are a mercenary working for pay, and"—he gestured at Gaius's tunic—"it seems that you could use it. Am I understood?"

Gaius ground his teeth so hard that the sound was audible where Tatus stood. His hands began to work on the fabric of his leggings, pinching the material convulsively. Tatus eyed him a moment longer and sat down. "This meal they're planning. Where is it to take place?"

Gaius muttered something, then raised his head. "A villa belonging to a merchant a half-mile west of town. Judean style, on a low hill surrounded by trees." His voice was flat, his eyes cold. "That's all I know."

"The time?"

"Still waiting word."

"That's from the informant."

A nod. "Judas. I'm meeting him later."

Tatus squinted at him. "Has he been paid yet?"

"Half. The rest he gets afterward."

"All right. We'll meet about two hours after sunset. Is there a suitable spot nearby?"

"The first crossroads outside the Golden Gate. A field close by . . ."

"I know it," Tatus said. "Plenty of brush, so we'll be able to hide the currus. That's all we'll need." Nothing to it: wait until the group passed on their way back to town, grab Joshua at gunpoint, then make for Antonopolis as fast as possible. He had no faith in complexity; he'd seen too many finely wrought plans collapse over one minor detail, and besides, he didn't have the resources. "That's it, then."

Gaius rose jerkily. "One more thing," Tatus said. "I understand that there's a faction in the Sanhedrin that wants our man killed. Ben Ezra wouldn't happen to be one of them, would he?" Even as Gaius shook his head Tatus knew he was lying. "There will be no further contact. Do you hear me?"

Gaius scowled and went to the door. There he paused and looked back. "We close him out if the extraction fails."

It was not a question. "Don't try me on this, civis," Tatus said quietly.

Gaius gazed at him, his eyes if anything grown colder.

For a second Tatus thought he was going to speak further, but he only grimaced and vanished from the doorway. Tatus nearly called him back, but the moment passed.

He turned to Claudian, who was gaping at the door with his mouth open. "What was he laughing about when I came in?"

"What . . . ? Something about the whole operation being a waste, that the Jews were doomed anyway. What does that mean?"

Tatus grunted to himself. He'd heard of some policy that the New Men were promoting, a plan to drive the Jews into the Arabian wastelands and open up Judaea for Roman settlement. The ultimate disposition of the Jewish question. Sheer fantasy; the Plebeians would never control the senate unless, perhaps, the war with the Ch'in went badly. Tatus swept his arm across the table. "Just talk," he said. "Forget about it."

"We should get rid of him," Claudian whispered.

"Maybe so." Tatus rose from the table. "If it doesn't go tonight, I'll do that."

"What was Gaius court-martialed for?"

Tatus stopped at the door. Claudian leaned across the table, a tense look on his face. Tatus shrugged. "Corruption."

Dropping his head, Claudian nodded. "Tonight, then," Tatus said. "I'll come by at sunset."

He sighed as he walked across the atrium. It wasn't exactly a lie—corruption had been part of it, among other things. It had happened in Bactria. Gaius had been running a unit of loyal tribesmen deployed to track down the local rebels and fight them on their own ground. Everything had gone well until two survivors wounded unto death had staggered into a legion base on the Oxus with a story the officers hadn't believed until they looked for themselves. An entire village had been massacred and burnt to the ground, the women and infants locked into the huts before they were fired and the men tortured to death as they watched. A few had been nailed to trees and left to die: an old form of execution, long since banned.

Tatus had been involved in the investigation, which had uncovered at least two other massacres, both in the same area, and reports of widespread torture, some by electrical fluid generators.

Nothing could be proven, else Gaius would have been wandering Hades long ago. The two survivors—a woman and child who had dug their way out of a burning hut—were found dead a short time later. The tribesmen had vanished back into the hills. Gaius himself insisted that the rebels had burned the place down—a likely story. In the end he'd been drummed out and his file flagged. Another *vigilis* gone feral, no government work under any circumstances.

Tatus sighed. He was breaking regulations by using him, but Gaius had connections in this part of the world that the vigiles, with its slashed budget and lack of manpower, could not match. Every thief, smuggler and rebel east of the Levant knew Gaius Labeo. But no matter. Tatus had dealt with worse in his time, and he knew how

to handle them. Although maybe "worse" wasn't quite the word . . .

He stepped out of the villa. It was morning yet, another eight hours until sunset. He wouldn't sleep; he was far too keyed up for that, but he did need something in his belly. No telling how long it would be before he'd see a full meal after tonight.

5

He found the temple unchanged. It had never much impressed him: a dowdy little pile of wood, pathetic compared to the Parthenon or the great temple of Jove in Rome. Even in Hind they did far better with their holy buildings. He'd never seen the inside, not that he particularly cared to. It couldn't amount to much, if the exterior was any indication. The Jews, needless to say, talked about it as if it were the Colossus, though even they said that the original had been much grander. He wondered if ben Ezra were inside, explaining how the crazed Roman had run him off.

Tatius had just finished eating at a shop nearby and had decided to walk the old town for a time rather than return to the inn. He drifted across the square, not headed anywhere in particular. It was far more crowded than in his day; better roads, he supposed, and more money circulating. The *agricolae* were out in force, whole families of them, patriarchs on down to babes in arms, gawking at the temple, the city, each other. Tatius smiled. The cutpurses would do well today.

While mounting the steps at the edge of the square, he paused to look back. From here he could see the money-changers in the temple courtyard, back in business following Joshua's raid. Tatius couldn't blame the man. A squalid lot, using religion for gain. He'd have liked to have seen it.

He walked on, pushing his way through the crowd. They paid him no mind—he didn't look like a Roman, with his blue eyes and light hair, starting to gray now. He could be anything: Scythian, Frank, Northman. The world met in Jerusalem.

At the entrance to the market sat a *testudo* with a larger than normal complement of troops, scattered around the street in a pattern that looked random but would provide a clear field of fire if things got ugly. Behind the turret Tatius noticed an object draped with a tarp. A Basilisk: the legions didn't display them in the open. Not in Judaea. Not after Hebron.

The market was the same as ever: packed, noisy, reeking with obscure stinks. The streets were narrow, barely wide enough for a cart, much less a *currus*. Every few feet stood stalls, tables, small shops or merchandise simply spread out on a rug. Nearest to the gate was an old woman's fruit stand. Her face was sullen, her eyes narrow and suspicious. She looked as if she'd been there for most of the last millennium and would be content to sit out the next. A smile appeared as a customer pointed to a pile of pomegranates, but the calculating look never left her eyes.

Across from her a vitros merchant, Armenian by the

look of him, stood beneath his symbol, a stuffed owl with a pair atop its beak. He haggled with a customer, screwing his face up and nearly weeping at the price he'd been offered. Tatius paused to listen as he wailed in broken Latin about his hungry children, his sick wife, the renegades who'd swept down on him on the long trip here. Tatius chuckled as he tried to imagine a gang of nearsighted bandits.

He passed a man selling sausages from a cart. The grease smelled as if it hadn't been changed since the days of Homer, but he was doing excellent business all the same. Just past him was a meat shop, the butcher nervously trailing a priest inspecting it to make sure that the dietary laws were being followed, an odd practice that Tatius had never quite understood. He wondered if they'd looked at the cartman's wares lately.

There was nothing like this in the western reaches of the *Ecumene*. It was all very oriental, and Tatius loved it. The bargaining, the uproar, the odd items one never saw for sale elsewhere. It was Roman policy to keep development in the junior states at a low level in order to avoid social upheaval and unnecessary competition. That was fine with Tatius; something would be lost when this sordid grandeur vanished.

And something gained. A few steps on sat a beggar, shaking his bowl and staring sightlessly at the sky. You didn't see that in the west either. Tatius felt in his purse. He had no coins, so he slipped a banknote into the bowl. The beggar, aware that someone was near, huddled down and swiveled his head in alarm. Tatius opened his mouth to reassure him but instead moved on. It was unlikely the man knew any Latin.

A couple of Dacians walked past, grunting to each other and eyeing the world with distaste, then a herd of Hindi merchants, their leader trying to brush off what was obviously a whore. Tatius was falling into the spirit of the place, giving himself over to pure enjoyment, his worries sloughing off him, when he entered a small square packed with people all facing a man sitting in front of a building at the far side.

Tatius realized immediately who this must be. He stepped back, colliding with someone who hurried off with a string of muttered oaths. He mused for a moment, then went on across the square. There was no real reason to leave. Next to no one knew he was here or who he was, much less what he looked like. No danger in staying for a time. No doubt the priests had someone watching, but even so, only ben Ezra had seen him.

He decided to take it as a small gift from the gods, a chance to discover what kind of man he was dealing with. Watching the crowd from the corner of his eye, he walked over to a wall that had seen better days. He leaned against it, bored traveler seeking rest, and with as casual an air as he could summon turned to the crowd.

Joshua was sitting atop a flight of steps leading into an old building that didn't seem to be in use. He was surrounded by a half-dozen of his followers, all dressed in the worn clothing of the very poor. Below him sat a big, dull-looking man, hair curly, massively bearded. That

must be his lieutenant, Simon. Joshua had given him a new name, a typical act for this type of cult, but Tatius couldn't call it to mind.

Next to Simon sat a woman, a little better dressed than the others in the kind of embroidered robe common among the local whores. She gazed raptly at Joshua as he spoke, her mouth open. His mistress, perhaps?

There was little to distinguish the carpenter from the rest. He wore a simple robe covered with a cloak, ragged but clean, and sandals cut from old tires. Not a large man, but well built, as he would be after working all his life with his hands. His hair was uncut, hanging halfway to his shoulders, his beard full and untrimmed, his skin browned and wrinkled by the sun.

He was debating a man in the crowd, who stood with his arms crossed as Joshua spoke in a quiet voice that Tatius could barely hear—not that he understood Aramaic anyway.

All the same, the carpenter was a magnificent orator. No histrionics or shouting, none of the stuff that passed for rhetoric in the senate these days, just a natural, almost regal ability to command attention to what he was saying. Tatius studied him with grudging admiration, convinced more than ever that the man had to be removed from Judaea.

Joshua finished speaking and the crowd muttered in agreement, falling silent as the other man began to question him, waving his arms for emphasis. He was holding a notepad with a stylus attached, and Tatius realized that he was a scribe from the local press. Interested, he moved closer.

Joshua nodded silently after the man finished. Next to Tatius stood a well-dressed figure, a merchant or clerk. Stepping close, Tatius asked, "What are they saying?"

Without looking at him, the man gestured at the scribe. "This one asks the rabbi about his talk with the governor, Priscus. He suggests a deal was made. The rabbi says . . ." The clerk raised a hand. "Ah . . ."

Joshua was speaking. For a moment he directed his words to the scribe, but then with a sweep of his arm addressed the crowd as a whole. His eyes were intense, his voice grave. Then his eyebrows went up, and he pulled at his tattered cloak.

The crowd erupted with laughter. The scribe smiled and threw up his hands in defeat. "Yes," the clerk said. "What has he to trade with the great Priscus?"

Joshua gazed out over the crowd, a pleased expression on his face. Tatius started as their eyes met. The carpenter squinted, as if seeing some distant thing that he both expected and feared, then swung back to his audience. He raised his hands and the noise cut off immediately.

Tatius retreated to the wall, feeling a chill that he could not explain. He looked about him, but no one was near except for a beardless young man handing out those damned pamphlets. He approached and Tatius curtly waved him away.

The rabbi spoke on, his voice calm, his gestures controlled. Tatius listened with only half a mind until one word caught his attention: Hebron.

He started as he became aware that he had once again nearly reached the rear ranks of the crowd. The clerk stood only a few feet away. "What is he saying?"

"Today's lesson. He speaks of the slayings at Hebron many years ago. . . ."

Joshua's voice suddenly gained in depth and volume, and Tatius frowned as he heard pure, cultivated Latin.

". . . I say to you, no good end can rise from evil means. However noble the goal, however fine the purpose, it is tainted, tainted utterly, by association with base methods, and the Prince of Evil smiles when men of good will fall into his most subtle trap. Consider the slaughter of the Midianites, the tale of David and Uriah, the glorious plans of Alexander . . ."

His head turned slowly toward Tatius, who shivered in unreseasoning fear that he would be forced to look into those eyes.

There was a disturbance at the steps. A woman, carrying a child, her face a mask of desperation, was arguing with the big disciple, Simon. He raised his hands as she pleaded with him. Joshua touched Simon's arm and the big man turned, smiled sheepishly and sat down. Gesturing the woman closer, the carpenter held out his arms. The child's leg was twisted and withered, little more than bone. Joshua whispered something and began massaging it. The child raised its head. It was a boy, and its face was that of the child at Hebron who had screamed as Tatius drew near.

Tatius stepped back, nearly losing his balance. He looked over the gathered heads. There: the woman with the ruined mouth, no longer rocking mindlessly. A few feet further on sat the man who had been gutted like a steer. Now he smiled and nodded at the scene on the steps.

Tatius stumbled as he backed into the wall. He sat down abruptly, closing his eyes and wiping the sweat from his face. It was the heat, the sun of this place. He wasn't used to it. That and the strain of the mission: he was getting old for this kind of thing. Perhaps the food had been bad.

He took a few deep breaths and forced himself to look up. The crowd was a crowd again and no more. He ran his gaze over the faces, relief flooding him as he saw nothing out of the ordinary. Joshua handed back the boy. The woman reached out, holding a wad of Roman banknotes. Smiling, Joshua covered her small hand with his and pushed it back to her.

Tatius allowed himself a snicker. Now that was new.

He turned as the sound was echoed. Two toughs stood at the far end of the wall, wearing the embroidered leggings that were standard for their type these days. As Tatius watched another pair ambled up, grinning nastily.

Tatius rose and edged toward a crumbled spot. These city riffraff—viperae, they were called—were trouble on the hoof. He wondered if someone had sent them.

The taller one shouted something short and vicious. Joshua paused, the crowd looking back and muttering. Rising, he answered the tough, his voice mild. Thumbs stuck in his leggings, the vipero cut him off with another curse. The carpenter went on, his tone more firm.

Tatius stood at the breach in the wall, ready to slip through and head down the street. He hesitated, foot poised on the broken stone.

The tall vipero leaned forward as Joshua spoke, a puzzled look on his face. One of the others grabbed his arm but he shook loose. He stared a moment at Joshua and seemed about to turn away. Then some fool in the crowd laughed.

The tough reddened and with a shout grabbed a refuse can at the end of the wall. Lunging forward, he threw it into the square.

The crowd rose as one as it landed atop a knot of listeners. A screaming mass, it pushed toward the entrance across the square. The tall rogue whirled to the others, cuffed one of them and bent to the wall, prying off a stone and letting it fly.

Already moving, Tatius clambered across the wall. This end was clear; a moment and he'd be well away.

Then he looked back. On the steps, Joshua stood tall, making no effort to dodge the rocks that struck all around him. His arms were raised, and he was crying out in a deep voice.

A wild rage burst within Tatius, rising from where he didn't know. He ran toward the tall vipero standing atop the wall. The others were busy and paid him no mind. He lurched at the tall one's back. There was a *Ch'in* method of boxing that used the hands like swords. . . .

The vipero thumped onto the wall, clutching his knee. Tatius gave him the edge of his hand once more, where neck met body, and he rolled off howling.

The others yelled and he swung around to see one of them bending for a rock. Tearing his case open, he drew out the pistol just far enough so that they could see the butt. The rock fell to the street and they were off.

He turned back to the tall one, ready to give him a touch of his boot. He caught sight of him limping across the square and clambered onto the wall in pursuit, but a twinge in his leg slowed him, and the tough vanished down an alley.

He slumped and then pushed unsteadily off. A whistle sounded nearby. He looked around to see what had become of Joshua.

The carpenter was just twenty feet away, helping an old man knocked over in the rush. The ancient teetered dazedly for a moment, chucking as Joshua spoke to him. Then the carpenter turned to Tatius.

He tried to tear his eyes away but could not. Joshua looked him over, nodding as if now certain of something he had before only guessed at. He smiled wearily and crossed his arms.

"Legatus," he said.

Tatius raised a hand to the crowd still milling around the square and laughed. The carpenter's smile grew wider.

What was it he'd just said: fair goals, foul means? He was right. Of course he was. Tatius drew himself up and slipped his case under his arm. They would settle this matter now, as men did, face to face, the two of them alone, with no violence, or prisons, or struggles in the night.

He took a step toward the man in the tattered robes. A shout rang out and he stumbled as he was pushed from behind. A soldier ran past, rifle at ready. He nudged Joshua with the butt as a half-dozen others appeared.

Tatius turned and climbed over the wall. He did not look back until he reached a corner that hid him from the square.

6

The air had grown cold with nightfall. Tatius felt it nip at him despite the heavy cloak he wore.

The field was overgrown with brush and trees. Behind them stood an abandoned shack, roof gone, walls crumbling. Parked next to it was the *currus*, invisible from the crossroads. A mile away the walls of the city embraced the lights within, washed out and pale beside the floodlights that cut the night sky. They had been waiting for over an hour.

The troops had released Joshua after a few minutes, waving him off with laughter that held no hostility. Tatius spent the next few hours following the carpenter and his people, unable to stop himself. He trailed them at a distance, using all his training, but every time the group halted Joshua seemed to gaze directly at him, a resigned half-smile on his face.

Finally a senior officer ordered them off the streets. Tatius returned to the inn and sat out the afternoon in his room, trying to grasp what had come over him in the market. He read the tract, relieved to find it the expected pack of lies: eastern magic tricks, folk tales about mustard seeds and fig trees, promises of eternal life and threats of divine retribution. For a short while he dozed, and dreamed of Hebron for the first time in years. Those few seconds in the smoke, the overwhelming stink of powder as he marched forward. A shadow appeared in the gloom ahead. He stopped as it spread its arms wide.

Legatus.

The rifle's weight deepened as he raised it to his shoulder. The figure approached. He was squeezing the trigger when he awoke, his head pounding. The pamphlet lay a few inches from his face. He knocked it onto the floor.

"We wait ten more minutes, then we go after Gaius."

Claudian shifted his stance but said nothing. He had been silent since Tatius had collected him, answering with nods and barely audible mutters. Tatius wondered how he'd act when the time came. He'd probably collapse, but you never knew. He might pull himself together. Tatius had seen it before.

He paced the few feet to the road—good Roman pavement, put down after the country had been conquered. Nothing in sight, not even a patrol. They'd been challenged by one a short while ago, a half-dozen troops in a *testudo*. Tatius had shown them his papers and sent them on their way.

He cursed to himself. It wasn't like Gaius to be late. Mad he might be, but on the job he was never less than efficient—otherwise Tatius would never have considered

using him. He reached into his cloak and fondled the gas ampulla he'd brought to deal with bystanders, trying to suppress the leaden feeling in his gut, the conviction that things had gone badly wrong, had been wrong from the start. The curse of Judaea, the Ecumene's bad conscience, the province where there was no clear path. Maybe the Plebians were right in wanting to eradicate the whole mess.

He checked his watch. Ten minutes and more had passed. He turned back to Claudian. "Right. Now where is he staying?"

The answer came as a whisper. "I don't know."

"What?"

"He wouldn't tell me. Said that security was . . ."

Stifling an urge to backhand the boy, Tattius whirled away without listening to the rest. Claudian followed hesitantly, clearing his throat. Raising a hand, Tattius shouted, "Silence!"

He threw back his cloak, no longer feeling the cold. Cursing aloud now, he called on every god in the Pantheon to damn Claudian, the Sanhedrin, Judaea, the bureaucrats in Rome who had sent him here with next to nothing to get the job done.

What now? Search these back roads? That would take all night. Returning to the city was out of the question—Priscus would be all over him by sunrise. He smiled bitterly and added another curse for himself. This wouldn't have happened if he'd been in control. Best find someone who knew where this merchant lived. Easily said—the hills out here were probably full of them.

He was turning to the currus when the night gave him his answer. A flurry of noise, distant shouts borne by the wind. As he was raising his head there came a shot, then a higher-pitched sound: a woman screaming.

"That's it." Grabbing Claudian's arm, he loped for the currus.

He told the driver, who'd been asleep behind the wheel, to head west. They'd gone only a half-mile when a running figure appeared in the headlights. A man, bearded and in peasant robes. He threw himself off the road as the driver hit the brakes.

Tattius got out, pistol in hand. "Get him," he told Claudian, and reached under the seat for a lantern.

The man had nearly flung Claudian off by the time Tattius reached them. He calmed down after Tattius flicked the lantern on and showed him the pistol, clicking the hammer back for emphasis. Claudian held him while Tattius shined the light on his face.

It was Simon, the big disciple. Raising the pistol, Tattius said, "Joshua."

Simon goggled at him and cried out in broken Latin, "I know not Joshua. Nothing I know . . ." followed by a gabble of Aramaic.

Tattius hit him with the pistol. Only a tap, but Simon cowered as if he'd been flogged. "You'd best tell me, barbarian."

Simon's small knowledge of Latin seemed to have fled him. Hand to the side of his head, he pointed up the road.

Tattius turned away. "Bring him to the currus."

Looking back fearfully, Simon blinked at Claudian and said, "You," using the familiar word. Tattius ignored it for the moment.

A short distance on, Simon muttered something and Tattius told the driver to stop. He didn't have to look far; a cloak lay on the shoulder along with a few sacks of bread, a loose sandal and a handful of the pamphlets. No blood; the shot had been fired for effect.

He inspected the brush by the roadside. Seeing no one, he went back to the currus and shone the light on Simon. "Which way did they go?"

Simon shook his head. "I not see."

"Don't lie to me."

Closing his eyes, Simon moaned, his mouth twisting as if he were about to burst into tears.

Tattius swung the door open. "All right, out."

Cringing, Simon emerged. "Get moving," Tattius said. Simon started running, never once looking back. In a few seconds he was lost in darkness.

Tattius smiled after him. Fine judge of men, Joshua.

In the currus Claudian was leaning against the front seat, resting his chin on his arm. The signifier was muttering to himself, a look of appalled confusion on his face.

"What did he say?"

"I asked who attacked him. It was Gaius." Claudian dropped back into the seat. "That killer has him. He knew. He said this would happen. . . ."

"Who?"

Claudian looked up. "Jesus."

Gritting his teeth, Tattius slammed his fist on the metal roof. "You're telling me you contacted a target?"

"Target." Claudian spat the word.

Tattius leaned further in. "Now you hear this, civis . . ." he began, but Claudian got out, slamming the door behind him.

"Target," he repeated. "Don't give me any of that vigiles talk, Marcus. This is a good, holy man. Didn't you read any of my reports? The lesson he gave on the hill?" He was shouting now. "I asked him about Rome, and you know what he said? 'Give to the Ecumene what belongs to it.' That sound like a rebel to you? And you handed him over to that butcher! Damn you, every tiro in the Academy knows what Gaius did! What kind of a man are you, anyway?"

He moved off, rubbing his face with his hands. Tattius held back the reply he deserved. "Seems to me that you hold some responsibility yourself," he said finally, keeping his voice level.

Claudian let his hands fall. "So what do we do now," he said without turning around.

Tattius leaned against the currus, ignoring the shock of the cold metal. What they should do was cut their losses and run. Erase any sign of Roman involvement, send in a report and wait for orders. That was the only rational course.

He looked at Claudian. The tension of the boy's stance was nearly palpable. No, he couldn't see his way to do the sensible thing. Not this time. He pushed away from the currus.

"We'll track him down," he said quietly. Claudian visibly relaxed. "You cover from here to the wall," Tatus said, "and I'll go to the end of the road."

He bent to the window. "Drive these back roads and look for anything unusual," he told the driver, who stared back with a touch too much intensity. "Ask anyone you see if a mob has gone by or a currus driving too fast, anything. Patrols in particular. Got that? I'll meet you here in an hour."

The driver threw his hands in the air and nodded. Tatus turned to Claudian. "You think I can depend on you for that much?"

♯ Claudian said nothing in reply. With a whirl of his cloak he walked toward the road that led to the wall. Tatus tapped the roof of the currus and it jolted away.

He started down the road, keeping his mind blank, unwilling to think about any of it. After a few steps he took out the pistol and opened the cylinder, checking the cartridges by touch. Satisfied, he tucked it back in his tunic. At least one of those was for Gaius.

7

The road he staggered down was gray and colorless in the dawn twilight. His leg burned worse than at any other time since he'd been wounded all those years ago. He touched it and found that it had started to swell from the knee down.

Tatus took another step, then halted and closed his eyes. He hadn't rested since it had all fallen apart, seven, maybe eight hours ago. All that time spent walking these unlit roads, for nothing.

Claudius had vanished as if spirited to the underworld. At first Tatus had been angry when he failed to make the rendezvous but had decided it was just as well. The boy was in no shape to be of any help.

The signifer was worse than useless. Completely untrained, he'd dragged Tatus off to inspect every passerby and unlit domus he stumbled over until Tatus sent him to wait back at the crossroads.

He heard a distant growl and opened his eyes to see a testudo silhouetted against the sky as it rolled across a nearby ridge. The night patrols had grown weary of coming across him. He'd run into the early morning watch in half a dozen different places. The first two times the decurio in command had gotten out to question him, but since then he'd merely shined his light on Tatus as they drove past, a skeptical smile on his face. Tatus had considered asking them to keep an eye open but had decided against it. If he did, the word would get back to Priscus, and he couldn't allow that.

He resumed walking, gritting his teeth every time his right foot hit the ground. A domus came into view, eerie in the morning light. He looked it over. Here, perhaps? There was something about the place . . .

He shook his head as a young girl, a house servant, emerged and headed toward a shed in the back. He must have made some kind of noise—halfway there she looked up at him, then ran back inside.

Past the domus he saw a stone bench. He thought of

sitting down, just for a moment . . . But if he rested now he'd never get back up, and besides, every time he stopped an image of Joshua appeared in his mind, as he'd been back in the market, wearing that tired, regretful smile. He was seeing it now. . . .

He growled, a sound of deep disgust, and looked skyward. I'm going mad, he thought.

He'd succeeded in keeping it at arm's length for most of the night by concentrating on the job at hand. That was how he'd been trained, how he'd sustained himself throughout his career, in situations a lot worse than this, times when he'd been on the verge of death himself.

Why, then, this feeling of catastrophe? Why did he hear the breath of the Furies behind him? Why did that picture keep returning: a ragged man, no longer very young, standing in a filthy public square with a look of bittersweet knowledge as he contemplated his enemy.

He thrust it far away and went on. Ahead was the main road. The landscape beyond was empty of trees all the way to the city walls. He eyed Jerusalem with loathing, wishing he'd never seen the place. The sun was now well up but hidden by a low overcast. It would be rain, and soon. He looked about him, wondering where to turn, no longer remembering which section he'd already searched.

He heard a rumble and looked back. A testudo appeared. Atop it sat the decurio and two of his men. Next to the turret lay something wrapped in a shroud.

The decurio leaned into the turret and spoke to the driver. The currus swerved toward Tatus, stopping a few feet away. Nodding cordially, the driver gestured at the corpse. "This what you're looking for?"

Tatus forced his eyes to the body, squinting at it with a mixture of despair and unreasoning terror. He was unable to speak as the officer lifted the fabric from the corpse's face.

He almost moaned in relief. It was a red-haired man, a Jew, his eyes bulging and his tongue stuck out, black and swollen. Tatus didn't need to see the marks on the neck to know that he'd been hanged.

"Who is he?" The hoarseness of his voice shocked him.

Opening his belt pouch, the decurio took out some papers. "Name's Iscariot. Collegium boy, one of our local intellectuals. Found him dangling on a hill a mile back. Left some of my people to search, but I don't think they'll find much." His smile reappeared. "You wouldn't know anything about this, Legatus? Sicarii work? Turn-coat, maybe?"

Tatus shook his head.

"Uh-huh." The decurio stuffed the papers back in the pouch. "Well, I'd offer you a ride into town, but I've got to pick up some men and check out the metal works. Had a report that something's going on up there." He tapped the turret, and the testudo started rolling.

He called out something else, but Tatus wasn't listening. He had turned to look at the officina a little under a mile away. The iron plant, atop Golgotha. The old place of execution. The Hill of Skulls.

He turned, but the testudo had gone too far. The signifer—but the crossroads was nearly as distant as the

hills itself. He searched the landscape for an ass, a cart—someone must be headed for the city—and saw nothing.

He had no choice. He started running.

Within fifty feet he knew he'd never make it. The pain was indescribable, a vicious force shooting up his leg and along his side, striking at his heart itself. With every step it increased, a jagged bolt coursing through him as his heel hit the pavement. He stepped onto the shoulder, but the soft earth didn't help at all. A surge of nausea hit him and he swallowed, nearly relishing the bitter taste at the back of his throat.

The road curved toward the city, and he abandoned it to strike out through the brush, each branch an agony as it tore at his legs. He waded across a small stream, nearly collapsing as he climbed the far bank.

It began to rain, a few drops at first but gaining in force as he went on. By the time he reached the hill he was soaked.

He found a narrow, boot-worn path to the top and paused only to blink the rain from his eyes before beginning the climb. Halfway up he fell in a slick of mud, crying out as his right knee hit the earth. Nearly in tears, he rose and hobbled on, holding his leg straight with his hands, squeezing it to keep the pain down where it belonged. He could hear them now, a mob, jeering at something, laughing viciously . . .

He reached the crest and bent over, his mouth open, breath tearing itself from his chest. He faced open ground, set here and there with tables, evidently an eating area for the workers. A few trees grew at the far end. In front of them a gang milled, of every race that made up the scum of Jerusalem. Jews, Franks, Romans, even a bare-chested Nubian. For a moment he thought he saw a red man, but that couldn't be.

They were drunk, most of them, shouting and throwing rocks and empty jugs at a man hanging from the trunk of the largest tree.

Drawing his pistol and gas ampulla, he went forward. Thirty feet further on he stopped, cocked the weapon and aimed it skyward. He fired one shot and tossed the ampulla amongst them.

Most of them scattered at the sound, those sober enough to be aware of what they heard. The rest went on stoning the figure in the tree until the gas hit them. They staggered off coughing, arms flailing at the billowing cloud. Tattius winced as the gas enveloped the tree. He hadn't meant that to happen.

The hilltop cleared. In a moment only a handful remained, muttering and shifting about in the mud they'd churned up. One of them grabbed a jagged chunk of pottery and came toward him, his eyes red, mouth twisted with curses. For a second Tattius thought it was the viper he'd seen in the market, but it could have been anyone.

He lowered the barrel. The man stopped, shifting his feet on the wet ground, tossing the shard from hand to hand. The rest watched silently. Tattius cocked the gun, bringing a new round into the chamber. It dawned on the tough just what he was facing. His eyes narrowed, his hand opened to drop the shard and a moan escaped his lips.

A howl split the air: the siren of a testudo. What was left of the mob ran off into the brush. The viper looked once toward the sound, then back at Tattius before breaking into a run.

Tattius eased the hammer onto the chamber and walked to the tree. One piece of trash remained, vomiting into the mud on his hands and knees. He shielded away as Tattius let fly a kick then staggered off after the rest. The gas was gone, dissipated by the rain, the ampulla fizzing faintly in the mud. He stepped over it and raised his eyes to the man in the tree.

There was no doubt that he was dead. His arms were spread wide, clotted blood marking where nails had been hammered through the wrists into the branches nearest the ground. He was naked, and not a patch of skin was unmarked.

He had been flayed. Swaths of skin hung from his side, revealing the white of his ribs. Around his body trailed a length of wire, the spiked kind used to pen cattle. It was wound three or four times around his head, tightly, so that each barb cut to the bone. The bark of the tree was stained all the way to the ground. He must have been hanging there for hours.

Tattius halted directly beneath him, clenching and opening his fists. The howl of the testudo faded as it circled the hill to the access road.

He noticed a thin red filament and reached for it. More wire, the kind used to carry electrical fluid. With a cry he yanked it loose. The carpenter moved.

A small motion, a slight lifting of his head from where it rested on his chest. His eyes opened, blank in his agony, and he muttered something almost too low to hear. A shudder went through him as he turned his head to Tattius.

For a moment his eyes remained fogged with pain, but then they cleared and Tattius sensed that Joshua knew him. His face changed. A smile touched his features and he nodded, regarding Tattius as if they were partners, as if they had completed some great task together on this hill on the outskirts of empire. Then another shudder racked him, a gout of blood spurted from his mouth and his body slumped against the tree.

Tattius stood shaking as the howl of the siren filled the world. Suddenly it cut off and there was a squeal behind him, followed by the sound of footsteps. An arm pulled at him. He lurched back, a flash of pain tearing through him as he fell to one knee. He looked up to see the *de*f** curio, pistol in hand, staring open-mouthed at the body. He turned to Tattius, his face pale. "You better stick around, ere."

Rising slowly, Tattius took a few steps into the open. He raised his head to the rain, blinking at the droplets washing down his face. The troops yelled to each other as they searched the brush. Calling to two of them, the *decurio* pointed at the tree. They walked over and stood shaking their heads until the officer shouted at them again, then began to pull at the body. After a moment one ran to the testudo for some tools.

A small open currus came around the corner of the *officina*. Seated next to the driver was Aridius, wearing a

helmet and a slick rain cape. The currus stopped and Aridius got out. With only a glance at Tattius he walked to the trees.

The soldiers had cut the body down and wrapped it in an equipment tarp. Aridius inspected it then turned to the decurio. They spoke a moment, the younger man gesturing to where Tattius stood. Finally the decurio let out a blast from his whistle to call the troops in. Aridius turned and walked slowly to Tattius.

Drawing himself erect, Tattius awaited him. Aridius stopped a few feet away, gazing down at the wet ground, his mouth working. He looked up, eyes widening as he saw the wire in Tattius's hands.

Shaking his head, Tattius let it drop.

"I hope you had nothing to do with this, comrade," Aridius said.

Biting his lip, Tattius looked away. The two soldiers had finished with the body and were looking in their direction. "He was . . ." Tattius stopped, unable to go on.

"He was what he said he was," Aridius said, his voice weary. He began to turn away, halting halfway as though something more had occurred to him. But the thought must have passed.

Four soldiers hoisted the shrouded corpse onto the testudo. The decurio, squatting next to the turret, strapped it in. Tattius noticed a stain already seeping through the rough tan cloth. The ramp of the testudo whined shut, the decurio clambered onto the turret and rapped on the armor. The small convoy started moving. Aridius did not look his way as they passed.

Tattius glanced miserably around the hillside. He needed rest, but there was the rain, and in any case he couldn't stand this place any longer. He felt his gaze drawn to the trees, where the wire still dangled, and forced them shut.

He went to the edge of the hill. His leg had gone numb, thank the gods for that, but it had swollen so badly he could barely walk. Keeping it stiff, he hobbled to the path, leaving a snake-like trail in the soft mud.

He would go to the inn and sleep. Things would look different when he awoke. His mind would be clear. He would put it all together then.

Below him the vehicles came into view. A small group of people was approaching. He paid no attention until he saw that Claudian was with them. He began to make his way downhill as fast as he dared.

There were five of them aside from Claudian, two men and three women. As the testudo drew near, one of them hailed it and it came to a halt. There was a short conversation, then a shriek from one of the women that stopped Tattius in his tracks. She was old; he could see gray hair beneath her shawl. He watched as Aridius helped her into the currus. A man, young and tall, most likely one of Joshua's brothers, got in beside her.

None of them noticed him. He opened his mouth to call out, but no sound would come. The procession moved slowly toward the walls of the city. In a short time they were gone from his sight.

He was marching through the smoke at Hebron, weapon in hand, the stench of powder in his nostrils. There were no cries ahead, no gunshots, only a silence that filled him with foreboding.

"Why do you behave thus, Roman?" A voice said.

"I believe and I obey."

"And what do these actions achieve?"

Tattius remained silent.

"Civilization?"

"Y-yes."

"Justice?"

"Without question."

"Peace?"

"Absolutely."

The smoke began to clear. Tattius lunged forward to escape the gloom, the voice, the questions.

But it was not Hebron. It was a flat plain of rock and sand baking under a flaming sun. The Empty Quarter of Arabia, now no longer vacant.

Before him were men and women by the thousands, burned black by the sun, dressed in rags when they were clothed at all.

Their bodies were wasted, limbs revealing the bone beneath, faces the image of death itself.

Beyond the mass of the dying stood fences of wire, the same that had wrapped the body of Joshua, and along them paced men with guns, men wearing the uniform of Rome.

The eyes of the Jews turned to him, countless yellow, empty eyes. He whirled to escape into the smoke, but it was no longer there. Only the presence remained, vast and awful. As Tattius raised his hands to his face it spoke, and its voice was that of the whirlwind:

"Here is your justice, Roman. Here is your peace."

Tattius jerked awake as the driver spoke again. He looked out the rain-spattered windows in confusion before recognizing the base at Antonopolis.

The signifier said nothing as Tattius got out, which was exactly as he wanted it. He winced as his right foot touched the pavement. It was bandaged and covered with ointment, and it would be some time before it was back to normal. The medicus had also given him pills, but he hadn't taken any—the pain was the only thing keeping him going. Taillights glowed as the currus drove off. Although it wasn't yet dusk, the clouds were low and it was still raining.

He turned to the headquarters. Above the door were carved the fasces and the letters SPQR. Senate and people, he said to himself as he crossed the wet pavement. Senate and people . . .

The guard gave him a long stare but didn't challenge him. Tattius knew that he presented a noble vision: face unshaven, leg bandaged, clothes wrinkled and dirty.

He got the same look at the transport section but the clerk took his papers without question. He told Tattius that there was a transport leaving within the hour for Creta. A big, slow vessel; perhaps the legatus would rather wait for the patrol boat tomorrow. . . . Tattius

waved him to silence. He wanted to get away as soon as possible.

He told the clerk he'd wait in the officer's mess and asked for a message form. He nodded his thanks and went down the corridor.

The mess was empty except for a navarchus in full uniform reading a scroll. Tatus went past him to a far table and sat with his back to the door. He opened his case to look for a stylus, grimacing as he saw the ragged tract. He filled out the form, vigiles code followed by his own and then the message: GAIUS LABEO IMPLICATED IN ACTIVITIES PREJUDICIAL TO THE SECURITY OF THE ECU-MENE. STRONGLY ADVISE ASSASSINATION ORDER SENT TO ALL . . .

Simple phrases, easily written, but he had not completed the second sentence when weariness overcame him and he sat back, his eyes closed.

The last two days had been a maelstrom of useless activity. He'd returned to that miserable rented room but was unable to sleep. Every time he closed his eyes, a feeling of sick terror gripped him. He lay there, squeezing the barrel of his pistol, staring at the door, waiting for it to fly open and reveal . . .

What? He didn't know.

He had left that place, to walk the wet streets while his mind cleared, working out what had to be done to wrap the affair up—as much as it ever could be.

The first on the list was Gaius. Tatus had no doubt that he'd fled, but he had to know for sure. He went to the temple and waited outside, lost in the crowds that had come for the sabbath. He almost missed ben Ezra when he emerged with two other priests, but spotted him as he left the square. Trailing a block behind, he waited until the others went their way, then quickly hobbled after the priest as he entered the courtyard of his domus.

Ben Ezra gave him no trouble. The sight of the pistol—and of Tatus himself—was all that was needed. At the name "Gaius" he began to talk. The train to Alexandria, early this morning, at dawn . . . he knew nothing else, please . . . Tatus left him without a word.

A few questions at the station told him the rest. Yes, the first departure this morning. A strange figure, easily recalled. Eyes wild, acting in a bizarre manner. On drugs, perhaps?

There was no sense in alerting the Alexandria office. Gaius was far too clever. He wouldn't be aboard when the train pulled in. Another stop, even a quick reverse back to Jerusalem and out by another route. He'd no doubt planned it long before.

He spent the rest of the day driving the streets, falling into a doze only to be woken by the jolting, the noise of the city, and his own sickness of heart.

He saw no sign of Claudian. Late in the afternoon he came upon Simon, standing on a side street, his cloak over his head, hiding his face from the few people out walking in the rain. The big man started as the currus pulled up and ran when he saw who got out. Tatus let him go, doubtful that he knew where the others were.

It was dusk when he tracked them down, at the Lion

Gate. He told the signifer to stop and watched as they left the city, walking behind a small cart pulled by an ass. A handful, no more. Joshua's creed was barely surviving his death.

He saw Claudian, taller than the others, dressed now in the same shabby robes. A squad of troops followed on foot. He waited until they passed through the gate, then told the driver to fall in behind.

A mile beyond the walls they climbed a low hill next to an olive grove. A tomb was cut into the hillside. For a moment Tatus wondered how they had paid for it, but then a well-dressed merchant appeared from the direction of a villa a short distance away. Tatus inspected the building, its lamps glowing in the twilight. That must be the place where Joshua had dined last night.

There was a muffled sobbing from the group at the tomb, the sound of a woman's grief. He watched numbly as the body, in a clean white shroud, was lifted from the cart and carried inside. There was no ritual. No music, no prayers, no keening mourners, only the rain, the disciples standing in the gloom, and the soldiers of Rome watching silently. In a moment it was over, the merchant's men sealing the tomb with concrete and stone, the troops spreading out in front of it, and Joshua's ragged company making their way back down the hill.

Claudian stopped as he saw the currus and shook his head once before stepping toward it. Behind him two of the others paused: the young man he'd thought was Joshua's brother and the gaudily dressed woman from the square. She said something to the man as Tatus appeared, and her eyes widened when he answered. She seemed about to cry out, but the man put his arm around her shoulders and led her away.

Tatus looked Claudian over. He was unshaven, his hair matted and wet. The rain was only a dull drizzle now, but it had grown cold, and he looked chilled in the thin robes that he wore. On his feet were a pair of poor man's sandals, the rubber clumped and stained with mud.

"Why are you doing this?"

Claudian sighed. "If you don't know by now, Legatus, there's no way I can tell you. I wouldn't know where to start."

"You swore an oath, son."

"I've sworn a greater one." He nodded down the hill. "My place is with them now."

"But what will you do? You, a Roman. An educated man. What can you give these peasants?"

Claudian paused, the trace of a smile on his face. "My father was a printer."

Raising his hand, Tatus pointed at him. "You . . . ?"

"Yes. In the servants' quarters of the villa." He dropped his head and laughed. "I'm sorry, Marcus. That wasn't fair, was it?"

Tatus regarded him silently. "Well," Claudian said.

"Are you going to bring me in?"

Closing his eyes, Tatus slowly shook his head.

Claudian stepped away. A few feet further on he stopped and looked over his shoulder. "Go with Christ, Marcus."

Back in the city, Tattius dismissed the driver and went to an inn to eat. The sight of the meal nauseated him, and he had it taken away. Instead he ordered a jug of wine, and then another, drinking for hours even though it didn't seem to affect him at all.

He bought a jug to take with him and drank it as he stumbled through the streets. After a time he reached the temple square. A preacher was speaking, dressed in furs, his hair knotted and filthy. Tattius listened for a moment. Damnation and judgement, rains of brimstone, the mighty brought low.

He gave a bitter laugh and pushed his way into the listening throng. The preacher fell silent as Tattius raised his voice, telling them all of the true apocalypse, the weapons that waited in the most closely guarded armories: the gases that killed without warning, the burning pitch that stuck to the skin and could not be extinguished, the flaming brands dropped by navolucers in their hundreds, to turn the cities of men into pyres . . .

He was answered with laughter, nervous at first but more confident as it spread. "We have no need of gods," he shouted, another mad prophet on the streets of Jerusalem. "We've outdone the gods."

It was still dark when he got back to the villa. Inside he lit a lamp and made his way to the servant's quarters. It was empty except for a small batch of pamphlets dropped in haste. He picked them up, nearly going to his knees, and crossed the atrium. In the far wing he found Claudian's clothes, his pistol, empty of cartridges, and a note. It was written on good paper and bore the seal of the Ecumene. It read, "Kindly inform Rome to send us no more vigiles," and was signed by Octavius Priscus.

He sat for a time with the note in his hand, then touched it to the lamp and watched it burn, following it with the pamphlets, one after another until ash covered the table.

He waited an hour, maybe two, then left for the barracks. When the curus passed the walls, he did not look back. He would rather die ten deaths than ever lay eyes on Jerusalem again.

The mess was beginning to fill up. Tattius sat quietly, barely listening as the officers settled in around him.

His career was over. Oh, it wasn't the worst disaster to ever hit the vigiles, and he had plenty of friends in the capital, but he knew that he would never be able to carry out this kind of assignment again. He thought back on all the other missions, wondering that it had been he who had done such things.

Eliminating Gaius would be his last act as an agent of

Rome. After that, who knew? He'd have plenty of time to think about it during the slow voyage back. Britannia—it was civilized now, he'd heard, and he hadn't seen its green hills in a long time.

He finished filling out the form and was waving it to dry the ink when he became aware of two men speaking. He listened idly for a moment, then dropped the form and jerked to his feet.

"They did what?" One of them was saying.

"Ran from a ghost. Half a dozen tough legionnaires."

"A ghost . . ."

"Some rebel who got killed in Jerusalem a few days back. They were guarding the tomb—Mithra alone knows why—and they claim he kicked through the concrete and came marching on out . . ."

Tattius swung around. They were sitting a few feet away, one laughing while the other finished the story. He took a step toward them, to ask where they had heard this thing, but stopped and forced himself to turn back.

Trembling, he gripped the edge of the table. No, he thought, no . . . it could not be. A rumor, a wild tale, no truth in it. And if it was true, it was the Sicarri who had done it, to get what they wanted out of it, or his followers, to make the prophecies come to pass . . .

He tried to retrieve the image of Joshua as he had been on that rain-soaked hill, of the wounds, of the blood dripping to the wet ground, but it would not come. It was gone, banished, as if it had been no more than a dream.

And he remembered the words of the tract: *For as lightning comes out of the east, and shines even unto the west, so shall the coming of the son of man be.*

He was shaking his head when someone spoke and touched his arm. An officer stood next to him, a frown on his face. "Legatus," he repeated, "the ship's about to sail."

Tattius looked past him at the room filled with uniformed men. The two he'd overheard were now speaking of other things. He nodded and reached for his case, then picked up the message sheet. He held it for a moment, then crumpled it, squeezing his fist tight.

He followed the officer through the packed tables and on down the corridor. Outside it had stopped raining. The horizon glowed red and gold, the last remnant of day. Above it burned a small dot of fire: the evening star. He gazed at it for a moment, the wind of Judaea on his face, then walked haltingly to the ship that would carry him west. ♦

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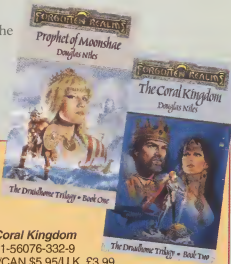
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